

PROJECT REPORT

The Oklahoma City Thunder's Tuesday night road game in Utah on March 11 was as nondescript as most of the 81 other regular-season games they'd play this season.

Early in the second quarter, with the Thunder up 26-21 on the Jazz and All-Star point guard Russell Westbrook sitting near the end of Oklahoma City's bench, a verbal altercation broke out between Westbrook and a pair of fans sitting a few rows above the baseline. What the fans, a husband and wife, said to draw Westbrook's ire didn't make it into the Twitter video that soon went viral. Westbrook told reporters after the game that the comments were racially derogatory; the fan vehemently denied it in a postgame interview. But Westbrook telling the husband, "I'll f---k you up, you and your wife," was the threat heard 'round the sports world.

The incident, and that specific video, immediately made its way through social media, into postgame interviews and eventually to major broadcast networks like ESPN and Fox Sports 1. Talk show hosts and sports commentators debated it ad nauseum for the next 48 hours, news outlets opined on fan behavior and Westbrook's quick temper, and the court of public opinion drew its own conclusions, both defending and condemning Westbrook's actions simultaneously.

The story, nor anything about the incident, ever showed up in one seemingly obvious place, though: the Thunder's own team news site. Digital reporter Nick Gallo, who handles writing duties for the team site in addition to working as a sideline reporter for the team's broadcast partner, Fox Sports Oklahoma, penned a recap of the game that night, but there wasn't a single mention of what had happened near the end of the bench.

In the grand scheme of today's sports media landscape, whether the Thunder reported on Westbrook's outburst is little more than a blip on the radar. Dozens of other outside news sources covered it at the local and national level, and in some cases, probably milked it for more than it was worth by talking about it for the better part of a week. But as journalism jobs become more scarce and teams, leagues and other organizations become their own content creators, should we be concerned about who we're getting our news from?

As a journalism graduate student and aspiring sports writer, I've watched this unfold over the past half-dozen years or so, and I wondered whether the growth in these types of positions had an adverse effect on traditional sports journalism during one of the biggest declines in journalism jobs we've ever seen. Through research and interviews with members of outside media and those

who work directly for the universities, organizations and leagues they're employed by, I sought to find these answers.

Subtle beginnings

It was Mark Cuban who first put the idea in Rich Hammond's head in October 2009. Hammond, working at the time as a deputy sports editor at the *Los Angeles Daily News*, had read what he remembers as Cuban's personal blog one day, in which Cuban voiced his frustration with the lack of coverage the Dallas Mavericks — the NBA franchise that he owns a majority stake in — were receiving from local and national media. On his website, MaverickBlog.com, Cuban denounced *ESPN's* Dallas affiliate, which he accused of no longer sending reporters to cover home games.

"The impact of this approach isn't just about the coverage Mavs fans get," Cuban wrote. "It also impacts the business decisions the Mavs make. We have already beefed up significantly the behind the scenes, interviews and game highlights video and reporting we offer on Mavs.com, and via a wide assortment of Twitter options from our broadcast crew and others. And we will continue to add more."

Hammond had heard similar complaints from the Los Angeles Kings, whom the *Daily News* had stopped sending reporters on the road to cover. Without the everyday news coverage it had become accustomed to, the Kings organization felt that it didn't have a way to reach fans.

A short time later, Cuban tossed out the idea of paying the *Dallas Morning News* to cover the Mavericks independently. The team would cover salary, travel and essentially all other expenses for the *Morning News*, and in turn the Mavericks would receive full-time coverage, which Cuban said he'd have no editorial control over. (In 2016, Cuban suspended the credentials of two ESPN national basketball reporters because of the company's use of Associated Press wire stories instead of having full-time beat writers for the Mavericks.)

Hammond, who had started a popular Kings blog on the *Daily News*' website a few years earlier, pondered the same idea and sent the link to Cuban's blog to a pair of Kings communications staffers just to kick around in their minds. Over the next few months, it evolved into a conversation about Hammond joining the Kings as a full-time staff writer, and eventually, a job offer to do exactly that. In October 2009, Hammond was officially hired as "an independent writer and blogger for the Kings' team website."

“There's no filter on it,” [Hammond told reporter Greg Wyshynski at the time](#). “It's not going through anybody to be edited. It's not subject to any review. I'm not filing to any person; I'm filing to the Internet.”

What Hammond was doing, at least as far as he knew, was revolutionary in sports media. Major League Baseball, through a financial agreement by team owners, had already employed reporters for its website, MLB.com, for half a decade. The NFL, as well as a handful of its teams such as the Denver Broncos, had hired bloggers to give fans behind-the-scenes access. And eventually with the addition of the NFL Network TV channel, the league had its own stable of reporters and analysts covering the league. But an individual team hiring away a reporter and giving them full editorial independence to cover the team, which Hammond insists the Kings always gave him, was unheard of.

Their partnership lasted just three years, though. In the midst of the 2012 NHL lockout, Hammond had followed his journalistic instincts and interviewed Kings player Kevin Westgarth, an active member of the NHL Players Association. Because Hammond was technically a Kings team employee, he was prohibited by league bylaws from communicating with players during a

lockout. The NHL league office demanded that he take down the story, but with the backing of the Kings organization, he refused to.

“I tried to let them know that it just that that wasn't going to be acceptable,” Hammond said.

“Given everything that I put out there, and everything that I'd said about what the job was, and the way that I've done it, professionally, I couldn't do it.”

In October 2012, Hammond announced via Facebook that he was leaving the Kings to cover University of Southern California football for the *Orange County Register*. His time with the Kings might have been short-lived, but the trend of teams — and soon university athletic departments — hiring their own reporters and content producers had already been cemented.

A new avenue

Less than a year earlier, and just a few months after it announced a departure from the Big 12 to move into the Southeastern Conference, the University of Missouri announced its own over-the-top streaming network that would not only broadcast an array of games, but it would also provide subscribers access to behind-the-scenes content and exclusive interviews with student-athletes, coaches and administrators. Despite a strong local media presence because of the school's top-rated journalism school and proximity to major markets in St. Louis and Kansas

City, the athletic department wanted a way to produce content that would build its brand, potentially sell tickets and connect with fans without having to go through news outlets to do so.

“We want to be a showcase for what's going on at Mizzou,” associate athletic director Andrew Grinch told the *Columbia Missourian* in September 2011. “By doing this as an athletic department, you obviously have access that others don't.”

Grinch, who spent a year as Wisconsin-based TV anchor before joining Missouri's marketing department in July 2001, saw the network as an opportunity for the school to not only promote itself, but also to bring in additional revenue through subscriptions that offered exclusive content for \$9.95 per month. The school hired Ben Arnet, a 2003 graduate and broadcast anchor, to serve as the network's main anchor, and has since added another reporter and a handful of producers.

Mirroring what Hammond and the Kings had done four years earlier, the University of Oregon hired Rob Moseley, the *Eugene Register-Guard's* Oregon beat reporter, to become the editor-in-chief of GoDucks.com in 2013. In addition to providing exclusive video content that was similar to what Missouri was offering, Moseley began writing daily reports from the Ducks' football practices — which he had access to but outside media did not — along with features and other stories he would have traditionally written on the newspaper beat.

Numerous schools followed suit, including the University of Colorado, which hired longtime Boulder sports reporter Neill Woelk to a similar role writing about the Buffaloes football and basketball programs, as well as occasional stories on Olympic and non-revenue sports.

Woelk was hired in 2015 after nearly three decades at the Boulder Daily-Camera, as well as short stints as a student newsroom advisor in Colorado and at newspapers in Oregon and Utah. A living, breathing example of what you'd describe as a newspaperman, Woelk never imagined that he'd go to work for any university, let alone the one he'd covered and investigated for most of his nearly four-decade career. As journalism jobs became harder to come by, especially as news outlets looked to hire younger, cheaper reporters and editors, Woelk saw the writing on the wall. CU's athletic department came to him with the idea of doing something similar to Moseley's role, and despite a bit of early trepidation, he jumped on it.

Much of his role mirrors Moseley's, including him being the only reporter allowed to watch practices and other team sessions, though the outside media have similar access to players and coaches for interviews. Woelk says his role not only helps to fill in coverage gaps — local media almost solely covers men's basketball and football save for a few features or breaking news

stories — but it's also a way for CU to reach fans without having to spend additional advertising and marketing dollars.

“Probably what's more important to our marketing department is the ability for us to reach our ticket base on a daily basis,” Woelk said. “They click on a story about the football team; well, there's a link if you want to buy football tickets.”

The athletic department has seen what Woelk describes as a substantial increase in click-throughs for ticket sales, and an ever larger increase in website traffic. On the CUBuffs.com homepage, which was primarily used to access schedules or statistics before Woelk came aboard, users see a list of stories and press releases that resemble a news website meant to engage readers rather than a quick-hit stockpile of information.

What Colorado and Oregon have done to in essence create their own media brands might have been new at the time, but nearly every Division I program has riffed off of those ideas in some way since. Schools now have in-house video production departments, some with anchors such as Mizzou's Arnet, to create exclusive content that even TV partners like ESPN and Fox can't produce. Videographers follow players and coaches through film sessions, team meals, workouts, pre-game and postgame and in some instances, to their homes, all in an effort to build their

audience and become content creators. More recently, that access has been monetized with schools selling sponsorship rights to their content. At Missouri, small advertisement bugs for brands such as Bud Light, Purina, Edward Jones and Shelter Insurance appear on or before their behind-the-scenes videos that are shared on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, where the Tigers have a combined audience of more than 150,000 users.

In a recent roundtable discussion, Jason Stein, a media executive who serves on the Board of Directors for Front Office Sports, posited that the next frontier for sports organizations is to become their own media brands.

“As a team, I think you have to think about how to have truly unique and differentiated content that no one else can have,” Stein said. “... No one else has that access. There’s not phones or video cameras on a plane while guys are playing cards at night. That’s sort of an invitation in that teams can offer that no one else can. The teams have to start creating all this content because the only people who have the same access that they do is the players, and they (the players) are bigger media companies than the teams are right now. If you don’t start monetizing it, they will — and they already are.”

Opportunities available

Teams, leagues and universities hiring their own reporters has provided a somewhat unexpected ancillary benefit: jobs in an industry that is losing them by the hundreds, and often thousands, each year. For young reporters, particularly those interested in sports broadcasting, there has seemingly been one career path for the past handful of decades: take a low-paying job in a small market, then once your contract expires after three years, look for a job in slightly bigger market, and so on. Olivia Landis, a team reporter for the NFL's New York Jets, wasn't willing to accept that as the only way she could make a career.

Now entering her second full year with the Jets, Landis says she's blown away by the opportunities being in a large-city market, which would've probably taken her 5-10 years to get into as local sports anchor, have created for her. Weekly, she rubs elbows with national reporters from ESPN, Fox, NFL Network and dozens of other outlets. Should she want to move from working for a team to a more traditional network, she believes the connections she's been able to make will be the difference between her and another reporter who hasn't been in the market getting hired.

For BJ Kissel, the Kansas City Chiefs' team reporter, it was an opportunity to work for the team he'd grown up rooting for, while putting his broadcast degree and experience as a sports blogger

to good use. After graduating from Kansas State with a degree in electronic journalism, Kissel moved to San Diego with his wife. Removed from any large contingent of Kansas City fans, he began blogging for Arrowhead Pride, SB Nation's Chiefs blog. There, he connected with Matt Miller, an NFL writer for Bleacher Report, who convinced him to join B/R's staff as a part-time writer. Soon after, he got another job offer — this time with Niles Media, a small production company where he worked in stage production, statistics and at certain points, would do sideline reporting for Division II football games. He worked at Niles just a year before he saw an opening for what he considers his dream job — covering the team he'd been a fan of his entire life.

The reviews of working for the organization you cover haven't all been as rave as Landis' and Kissel's were, though. Albert Breer, who worked for the NFL Network from 2010-2016 after a stint at the Boston Globe, sharply criticized the league after it removed him from covering the New England Patriots because of a line of questioning head coach Bill Belichick didn't like.

“I think when I got there, there was very clearly a wall between us and the league,” Breer told a Boston sports radio station in 2016 when it was announced he was leaving for Sports Illustrated.

“It was one of the first questions I asked when I left the [*Boston*] *Globe* is, ‘Am I going to be

able to do the job the way that I did at the *Globe*?' And the people that were there at the time said, 'Absolutely.'”

“...You’re taught for all these years to challenge people, and that’s your job and everything else,” Breer added. “I think you guys got a first-hand look at what happened when I started challenging people.”

Both Kissel at the professional sports level, and Woelk at the collegiate level, have been made aware of the boundaries of their reporting. When it was announced that Chiefs wide receiver Tyreek Hill — who had been arrested and charged in a 2014 domestic abuse case — was under investigation for domestic battery this March, the Chiefs’ team site made no mention of it. When head coach Andy Reid holds his first offseason press conference, Kissel won’t ask questions about Hill, and he’ll likely wait until outside media has finished with all of their inquiries before asking questions for the team-focused stories he and his team will produce.

Similarly, when news broke of University of Colorado assistant football coach Joe Tumpkin being an alleged domestic abuser in 2017, local and national coverage ensued. Tumpkin was eventually dismissed, and head coach Mike MacIntyre was investigated for any role — or lack thereof — he had in reporting it to proper authorities. But all was silent as CUBuffs.com, and

today, you won't even find Tumpkin's bio on the team site anymore, despite MacIntyre, who was fired after the 2018 season, still having his there.

Even on issues not nearly as serious as off-field arrest and incidents, team reporters often have their hands tied when it comes to reporting news. When the Denver Broncos were rumored to have agreed to a trade for Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco in mid-February, the team's site was initially quiet. Later that day, it published a story citing reports from ESPN's Adam Schefter and NFL Network's Ian Rapoport. But in the second line of the story contained this disclaimer: "The Broncos cannot comment on or confirm the reported trade." The team site didn't officially confirm the story until a month later, when the new league year began.

What's next?

It's exactly these limitations that allow well-sourced outside media members to keep a foothold in their traditional markets, despite the layoffs that have plagued sports journalism, argues Andrew Haubner, the sports director at KEZI-TV in Eugene, Oregon. Haubner was a student at Colorado when Woelk began working for the athletic department and now covers Oregon athletics alongside Moseley.

Other reporters might view organizations hiring their own writers as a threat to traditional news outlets, he says, but he and the other reporters on the Oregon beat seem to view it more as a challenge to tell better stories and work harder for scoops.

He cites an instance this past fall, where nine Oregon softball players transferred from the Ducks' program after highly successful head coach Mike White left the school amid a contract dispute.

Without much more than a peep from the athletic department, speculation and rumors ran rampant, and fans implored Haubner and other outside reporters to find out the truth. What they uncovered was a deteriorating relationship between White and athletic department officials, which ended with him leaving for a job at the University of Texas and the majority of the Ducks' starting lineup from the year before transferring because of issues with new head coach Melyssa Lombardi.

Even though fans flock to reporters like Moseley because of his separate access to the program, Haubner believes they know what they're getting from a reporter who is paid by the organization they cover.

"I think they understand what the difference between those two things are," he said. "For example, people aren't going to the NFL Network to hear bad news about the NFL. I think

people ingesting media are becoming more cognizant of the whole sports media industrial complex.”

Woelk adds that local news outlets, including the *Daily-Camera*, have upped their coverage of CU since his hiring. The paper still covers the revenue sports primarily, but it also does regular stories on the school’s Olympic sports, as well as women’s basketball and volleyball.

The school doesn’t necessarily view outside media as competition, simply because their objectives are different — news outlets want as many viewers and readers as possible to drive revenue, while the school just wants its name and brand on the forefront of people’s minds.

“It’s a one-way competition,” Woelk said. “That’s the best way I can explain it. We don’t care where people read about University of Colorado, as long as they’re reading about University of Colorado. ... It’s not a huge difference to us if it’s on the *Denver Post*, the Boulder Camera or Channel 9, as long as they’re connecting with the University of Colorado. That’s what we want.”

The ultimate ramifications of organizations hiring their own reporters and creating their own in-house content are uncertain. Arguments can be made that sites like MLB.com or individual team sites are pulling eyeballs — and the revenue that comes with them — away from newspapers and

digital sports outlets like The Athletic. And reporters on both sides of the sports media equation give that theory credence.

Looking at raw readership numbers, though, most media outlets are seeing more interaction with their content than ever. The crux is, because information is immediately available on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, as well free content aggregators who take content reported by other outlets repackaging it, consumers are less willing to pay for digital sports coverage, particularly at the national level.

According to SportsBusinessDaily, Bleacher Report, whose primary content source is repackaged information from other sports media sites, had 47 million unique visitors in November 2018, surpassed only by ESPN, CBS Sports, Yahoo! And USA Today.

Subscription-based sites like The Athletic have had success in breaking into individual cities because of a lack of national competition and shrinking newspaper stuffs. The company employs more than 300 full-time editorial employees in roughly 50 local markets, but competing with major media companies like those previously mentioned remains a challenge. Even ESPN the Magazine, which began its run in 1999, shuttered its print operations last month, citing multi-million dollar losses and a struggle to entice readers into buying a print magazine subscription.

The loss in revenue comes amid a brutal eight-year run for ESPN's television network, which lost more than 14 million cable subscribers between 2011 and 2018, in large part due to cord-cutting and the amount of information available on social media.

At the same time, athletes, empowered by the growth of social media and a desire to reach their fans without going through traditional media, have joined the content creation world. The Player's Tribune, founded by former New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter, helps athletes pen personal essays, whether it be about mental health or announcing which team they'll play for next, which Golden State Warriors star Kevin Durant did. Instead of having no editorial control of how their stories are told, athletes now have the chance to include — or omit — any details they choose. Durant, who recently told NBC Sports that the media "needs him," says players controlling their narrative is simply a response to the number of media outlets trying to create news.

"It didn't start with Uninterrupted or anybody else's own media company," Durant said. "It started with The Score, Bleacher Report, House of Highlights, all of these platforms that aggregate stories from big media companies like NBC and ESPN. It's so easy now to put your

own spin, 'cause you have your own platform. So, after a while, players are starting to see how so many random people want to run with their messages and spin it around.”

What effect a small number of athletes opting to tell their own stories actually has on media is impossible to discern right now, much in the same way we can't tell the effects of team reporters.

A trend line has been started, but it's far too early conclude where sports media is headed and if more entities getting into the fold is actually hurting the industry at all.

As the number of sports media members declines — no specific numbers are available, but journalism as a whole saw a 23 percent drop in newsroom jobs between 2008 and 2017 — sports fans and the people who want to see sports figures held accountable feel the brunt of the impact.

Scandals like those at USA Gymnastics, Baylor University and other institutions go unpublished, and those in positions of power are left unaccountable. Even cases of financial malfeasance and corruption — like the college basketball bribery scandal — are often left unpunished.

At the same time, sports fans are increasingly left with fewer coverage options, particularly at the local level. Newspapers and TV stations across the country have chosen to cut down or completely eliminate their preps and lower-level college sports coverage, with the *Denver Post* serving as one of many unfortunate examples. The *Post's* sports section, considered among the

country's best when it boasted writers like Rick Reilly, Adam Schefter, Marc J. Spears, Gene Wojciechowski, Shelby Strother, Jay Mariotti, and Jerry Crasnick, has shrunk by nearly two-thirds since 2005. It now has one columnist, two Denver Broncos beat writers, one Denver Nuggets, Colorado Avalanche and Colorado Rockies reporter each, and a general assignment writer. Long gone are the days when the paper needed an entire sub-section solely for Broncos stories. Now, the sports section is anywhere between 50 and 75 percent wire stories on a given day. After employing reporters to cover preps and college beats, the *Post* rarely covers either save for a one-off feature every week or so. In their place, both the University of Colorado and Colorado State University have hired in-house reporters, and the Colorado High School Activities Association (CHSAA) has created its own digital media outlet to provide high schools coverage. But as with any of the institutions that hire their own reporters, CHSAA doesn't report on its warts, such as the postgame brawl between a parent and coach this past season.

These scenarios are not novel or limited to Colorado. Across the country, as newspapers downsize and media outlets like *The Athletic* scoop up talented reporters, they're often not replaced. Young reporters who demand lower salaries than their veteran counterparts are often a priority, and those elder statespeople are given buyout opportunities or laid off. Readers are left with less experienced or less knowledgeable journalists covering their beats, and many no longer

see the necessity for subscriptions when they can get most of their news and analysis free of charge from social media or bloggers working for little to no money.

Although not having as many sports reporters doesn't portend the dire circumstances that not having news and investigative reporters might, it is no doubt a loss for sports fans and creates a dangerous vacuum for corruption and power to run rampant. "If there's not checks anywhere, there's going to be some bad people that are going to be doing bad things and allowing bad things to happen," Haubner said. "Yeah, and people that stop that are outlets like the Indianapolis Star Outside the Lines. It is you know, any of your local TV or newspaper reporters. And that's the only thing that makes me a little uneasy as what happens if this becomes such a viable option, that all of a sudden, nobody wants to actually be the one putting feet to the fire anymore because it's more expedient not to."