

**SPORTS REPORTING ONLINE:
Where it is and where it's going**

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COMM310
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April 2007
Final Project

Introduction

The World Wide Web plays such a powerful role today in our society. It puts so much data at people's fingertips, just a few clicks away. It should be no surprise that the media, particularly newspapers, are taking advantage of this tool to reach an audience.

"Today, readers who want to see the news virtually as it happens need only go to their home computers to call up the Web page of their local newspaper," writes columnist Charles Walsh in an editorial published on February 20, 2007 in the *Connecticut Post*.

"Not only is all the news in today's edition there, but it also has abbreviated versions of articles that won't appear in print for 10 to 16 hours," Walsh continues. "In addition, the Web newspapers have features print can not duplicate."

Sound, video, related links, weather, instant corrections and search functions are only a few of the things that the Web can do (and print can't), according to Walsh. Merge all of these together and you have a pretty powerful medium – not to mention if you devote these to a specific topic. Say...sports.

The purpose of this research paper is twofold: (1) to examine the current state of sports reporting online and (2) to offer some perspective about what might happen in the future to sports reporting online. The paper will attempt to succeed in these goals by supplying information on the topic from professionals, published articles and the opinions of others who have an interest in sports.

This study of sports reporting on the Web will be done with newspapers specifically in mind, as this is the field I'm most interested in and involved in.

Sports Reporting Online: Today

The best way to understand how sports reporting online works is to take an inside peak at some of the newspapers themselves.

The *Los Angeles Times* added to its sports presence on the Web in the fall of 2006, when it announced the launch of a new branch of its Web site called Varsity Times.

Varsity Times followed a model adopted by some other newspaper Web sites across the country, which had experienced some success. It put the emphasis online on local coverage, what local newspapers do best, specifically by increasing high school coverage.

Staffwriter Dan Loumena wrote about the endeavor in the Sept. 1, 2006 edition of the *Los Angeles Times*. In addition to publishing the features and stories in the print edition, as it had done previously, and posting scores and highlights from events each evening, again as it had already been doing, Varsity Times was introducing some new items to the site.

The additions included blogs for various sports, “profiles on the top Southland athletes,” breaking news, football rankings, standings and schedules. Also added to the site was “Your Scene,” photo pages where users can upload their own images and “MaxPages,” home pages for each school as well as rankings and statistical leaders.

This project, outlined in Loumena’s article, was simply a microcosm of what was happening in the greater newspaper industry. Ambitions like this were underway throughout the country.

One doesn't need to look all the way to California to see the influence the Internet is having on sports coverage by newspapers. All we really need to do is take a look in our own backyard: at the *Democrat and Chronicle*.

Similar to what the *Los Angeles Times* has done, the *Democrat and Chronicle* offers live score updates, breaking news, team pages, schedules, blogs, audio slide shows, podcasts, photo galleries and more, all on the sports pages of its Web site.

Jim Castor, assistant sports editor of the *Democrat and Chronicle*, says the high school section has had tremendous success.

"Clearly, from the numbers, we know our high school postings, our high school pictures and our high school blogs are very, very popular," he said. "That's not the only thing our department offers online, but it's one of the biggest. Our high school coverage is strong and really drives what we do."

By monitoring the amount of hits to specific Web sites, Castor said that his department can determine what content is most popular among its readers, and then translate that to future story ideas and even coverage in the print edition.

Besides its work with high school sports, Castor said that its coverage of the Buffalo Bills has always been popular online.

"Clearly, the Bills are far and away the number one professional team of interest in the area," he said. "Some people may argue differently, but based on what we see, the interest for it on the Web, we hope to continually provide coverage of them."

The department also recently launched a newsletter for its columnist Bob Matthews.

“His readership has always been high,” Castor said. “Now we know that his viewership is high too. That newsletter has been really successful.”

Castor, in his 43rd year at the *Democrat and Chronicle*, says the Internet has revitalized the way the sports department works.

“It allows us to get news out much more quickly,” he said. “We’ll decide if something should be posted on the Web, and then we’ll either ask a reporter to write three or four paragraphs and post it or the editors themselves will post something. We can do it either way.”

Castor said it wasn’t always that easy.

“When the Web first came out, we didn’t have Web tools to use to post online,” he said. “We had a number of technical problems. Posting now is a lot easier and a lot quicker. Our tools are a lot better today. I can post a story in about three minutes. It didn’t used to be that way.”

“The technology has evolved,” he added. “Now we use the Web as a news tool around the clock, 24/7.”

Steve Boerner, who spent 22 years at the *Democrat and Chronicle* as a photographer, editor and designer, offers a different perspective. He was working at the newspaper during these changes, but he wasn’t directly involved per se.

“I was probably the least affected in the newsroom, but I saw a lot of the changes going on around me,” Boerner said.

“I remember how at the start we focused on the end result, needing to get stuff online,” he said. “There were huge demands on reporters to write for print and then the Web, and there was a lot of pressure. What has been happening more recently is they’re

rebuilding the whole newsroom. The focus is not just print, but also online. In fact, maybe online comes first now instead of online as just an add-on.”

Boerner, now a Communication/Journalism professor at St. John Fisher College, said that the Web is going to be a huge part in the future of newspapers.

“Of everything a newspaper covers, I think sports have the most potential online,” he said. “Sports fans can never have enough numbers, statistics and facts on individual players or teams. They absorb all of this. The thing about the Web is we can put all of that up there, organize it into databases and we can hold onto it forever.”

“It sounds to me like a sports fan’s dream to have all that information at their fingertips. Not only for the major leagues, but also the local teams, high school and so on,” Boerner said.

St. John Fisher sophomore Cara Pink said she can’t get enough in sporting news and she does almost all of her scouring online.

Statistics, standings, forums, boxscores, personal interest stories, expert analysis, opinions, blogs, podcasts, audio, video, photo galleries – Pink does it all. Although she can experience some of these elsewhere, nowhere are they available to her at the speed and ease that she can obtain them online. The Internet offers more than that too.

“The Internet makes sports coverage unique because you can basically search and find anything you would ever want to know about a certain sport, team or player,” Pink said.

An Atlanta Braves, Pittsburgh Steelers and San Antonio Spurs fanatic, Pink said she turns to the Internet more frequently for her news than television or newspapers.

“I go to places like yahoo.com or ESPN.com for the latest sports information because everything is up-to-date,” she said. “You can find more information about a certain game or player than what you can find on a TV broadcast or a newspaper article.”

Television is her second favorite source for sports information, simply because of ESPN. Newspapers, in her opinion, “usually just give you an overview of the latest sports news.” However, she did say she would turn to newspaper Web sites, simply because they offer more than a traditional print newspaper can.

“I like finding what I want to find quickly and easily,” she said. “I also enjoy the freedom to read only what I want to read.”

Fisher sophomore Nicole Russo agreed with the quick and easy sentiment.

“For immediate information and convenience, I think online is far ahead of other mediums,” Russo said. “Because of this, it’s a great medium for sports, where things are always changing and people want information immediately.”

Like Pink, Russo said that the Internet is her number one medium of choice for sporting news. For her though, it’s because she follows a sport that isn’t necessarily considered “mainstream,” horse racing.

“It gets more coverage online than anywhere else,” Russo said. “I read articles on a lot of different sites, subscribe to a service to follow favorite horses, watch races live online, play in a fantasy league and go on message boards.”

When one thinks about it, it is amazing what sports fanatics can do online *already*, the depth and the capabilities available to them, much of it described above. It’s hard to imagine what new features and aspects of sports online might be to come.

Sports Reporting Online: Tomorrow

Many experts believe that we're only scathing the surface of the potential out there for sports online.

As Walsh writes: "Comparing the present state of newspaper Web sites to future Web sites is like comparing an American Indian village on Manhattan Island to the New York City of today. As technology advances, a whole new world of online edition doodads will become available at a finger-tap."

So what might the coming age of online sports journalism involve?

"Nobody really knows," Boerner said. "I do know that five years from now it'll be something we can't imagine. The technology's changed so much already. Five years ago, no one knew what a Podcast was. Who knows what it will be like five years from now."

Castor is cautiously optimistic for what's ahead.

"Everything we hear about the Web is positive," he said. "There's plenty of room for growth and we know that. Additional resources need to happen though. There's only so many hours in a day, and it's huge in itself putting together a daily paper."

"That being said, if we devout some more resources to it, sky's the limit with online," he said. "Our possibilities are really endless. There's all sorts of wonderful things to be done."

If resources were endless (of course they're not though), newspapers may be able to take any idea or two from the European coverage of the World Cup and apply it toward its coverage of local sports.

In the June 15, 2006 edition of *Marketing Week*, out of London, there was an article called “World Cup media playground offers a glimpse of the future.” It discussed the frenzy behind the World Cup and how the Internet has allowed for a depth in coverage that no other medium can accommodate.

The 2006 World Cup in Germany, as the article explains, had all of these facets at its disposal, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) used them on its Web site. Namely, “podcasts, blogs, maps and DAQs [data acquisitions] – as well as the online match reports, gossip and quotes.” That is just the beginning. A radio feed, an email service, a place for breaking news, and play-by-play written out as text were also among the offerings, and much more.

The BBC weren’t the only ones taking part in the media blitz. *Guardian Unlimited*, a British weekly newspaper, had its own “World Cup Show” on its Web site, according to the article. This page was “full of excellent sports reporting, facts and figures and commentary and, as well as its ‘World Cup Show’ it also offers ‘Fantasy Fussball.’”

Other newspapers and other European media Web sites undertook similar measures in celebration of the World Cup.

While this competition for providing everything one could possibly want for one particular event is perhaps a sign of things to come, and is already underway in some cases, even this article denotes a question mark regarding the future of the media.

“Some may say this is simply ‘old media’ thinking,” the article writes. “But surely the jury is still out on the way the still-dominant news media – newspapers, radio and TV – will eventually relate to the interactive new media?”

The definite answers have yet to come.

“Like any new technology, online is still evolving and we’re still learning,” Castor said. “We’re experimenting with it. For example, I try different things, posting and the like, and then I’m able to say to management, ‘here’s what we did, here’s the result.’”

Some wonder if newspapers could be phased out completely at some point. At least for Boerner, that would never happen.

“There’s always that desire to hold something tangible, something physical,” Boerner said. “I really think this new age for newspapers is in its infancy. Once they figure a better way to deliver news electronically, maybe by a more highly advanced cell phone, look out.”

Of course, along with this, a better technology could lead to even more capabilities in sports reporting and sports coverage. As Castor said, “sky’s the limit.”

We’ll have to wait and see what the future holds.

Conclusion

Out of any area of content pursued by newspapers, sports is the one that is really taking off online. It seems to be the field with the most potential. Studies see it, professionals see it, and the everyday sports fans see it. The possibilities are near endless, and as the online technology continues to change, they are likely to become even more numerous.

I can also attest to the growth of sports reporting online. I see it every time I go into work, as a part-time employee of the sports department at the *Democrat and Chronicle*. There really is an online first mentality, getting that information out there, and the great thing about it is people do look at what we compile and post online.

One time, I was sent to a cheerleading competition at SUNY Geneseo and helped track down caption information for Web exclusive photo galleries. I was later told these galleries received some ridiculous amount of hits, in the tens of thousands.

Another time, I submitted real-time scoring updates from the Fisher football game in Alliance, Ohio via e-mail, which were subsequently (and immediately) posted on the Web by Jim Memmott back at the newsroom. This was teased in the print edition that morning and I had heard this also received an enormous amount of hits.

Also, every day at work, I help take down high school scores and stats from area coaches. This information immediately goes up on the Web.

And if I'm ever out on assignment, one of the first things my editor will want from me is a few paragraphs for the Web.

Then there's the blogs that surround me, the podcasts, the audio slideshows and much more. I get to see all of this around me, all of this firsthand. It is something special to be able to see the process of gathering information and posting it online, and then at the same time be able to look at it from another angle, as a sports fan. Oftentimes, I myself go to sites like democratandchronicle.com for the latest in sporting news.

This push toward online is the direction newspapers are headed. It goes hand-in-hand with the digital age we live in.

The response is there too. This is what people want to see. This is where the industry is, this is where it's going, and frankly, in my opinion, it couldn't be a better way to distribute sports information to the general public. I'm happy to be a part of it, and now – having conducted this research – to be better informed as to what sports online is all about and what may be ahead.

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