

Social Media and College Athletics: The Gift and the Curse

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Abstract

Current trends and theory on sport communication as well as use of social media was examined in order to draw conclusions about the current state of social media and the impact it will continue to have in the context of college athletics. The sport communication model is evolving as a result of the digital revolution and proliferation of social media, and interaction is crucial. With the increase in interaction and breakdown of “middle-men,” such as sports journalists, comes great opportunity and great responsibility because the message is now being disseminated straight from the source through outlets like Facebook and Twitter, for better or for worse. Twitter, in particular, exemplifies the good and the bad that can come from social media in college athletics. Interest in collegiate athletics, as well as visibility in the mass media, has grown at a high rate over the past 50 years, and with it the value of the respective brands. Social media plays a large role in the development and management of those brands in the digital age. The findings suggest social media and fan interaction will become even more central to everything a college athletic department does on the integrated marketing and communications front.

College Athletics Meets the Digital Age

The digital age has arrived, and it is rapidly changing the way people communicate, share information and connect with one another. These concepts extend to the sport communication realm as well, in which fans interact with athletes, coaches and team administration. College athletics are similar, but also present some unique challenges and opportunities because of its association with an institution of higher learning and also because the athletes are typically 18-23 years old, have to maintain amateur status and double as full-time students. Athletic departments in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) are also typically on a much tighter budget than their respective professional league counterparts. This puts a higher priority on utilizing free or inexpensive means of communication, such as social media, to communicate with their publics.

The free and open Internet has made social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter crucial components of any school's sport communication strategy. The rising phenomenon of social media, as defined by Weinburg (2009), is "relating to the sharing of information, experiences and perspectives through community-oriented websites" (qtd. in Pegoraro, 2010, 502). This fits in well with communication strategies for athletics because, as Billings (2011) points out, "sports fans seek any form of connection to the players, ranging from the simplest of casual conversations to a piece of autographed memorabilia to, more recently, following their favorite athletes on websites and through social media such as Twitter and Facebook" (1). There is inherent power in a sporting event, "whether it is a megasports event such as the Olympics or World Series that is viewed by millions, or a niche sports event such as a college volleyball game that still has been found to have a demonstrable and loyal and loyal following" (Billings, 2011, 2). That, in turn, means there is inherent power in the communication surrounding these events,

and with great power comes great responsibility. According to Edison Research (2010), 48% of people in the United States currently have a personal profile page on a social media site, up from 34% in 2009 and 24% in 2008, so it is safe to assume that percentage has continued to trend higher in the past year and a half (Pegoraro, 2010, 502). With that large potential audience in mind, coaches, staff and student athletes have to be extra careful about what they share online because those messages can have powerful consequences, which can be good or bad.

The methods, the mediums, and even the communication model are evolving, but the importance of the message remains constant. Rowe points out that sports have an extraordinary ability to “stimulate social exchange by all available means” (Billings, 2011, 108). Emerging technology is making it easier and more efficient to carry out these exchanges. He goes on to argue, “sports and media, therefore, interact dynamically as cultural and social agents, with the only current certainty being that, together and separately (the latter increasingly difficult to imagine), the media sports cultural complex shows not the slightest sign of ossification or retreat” (Billings, 2011, 109). The “cultural complex” can be narrowed to a community and culture around college sports as well.

The evolving mediums are changing the fan experience, the student-athlete experience, the coach experience, and those who cover the teams/events. Interaction is a key element for any college athletics sports information/marketing staff to implement. Wallace, Wilson and Miloch (2011) point out that, “as the expansion of communication platforms continues, sports teams must develop more sophisticated relationship-centered marketing strategies and brand objectives for these online environments” (429). Supporters want to feel engaged in what is happening with their favorite school’s teams because it makes them feel more intimately connected with the student-athletes they admire.

Defining Sport Communication

Sport Communication is a Process

According to the model developed by Pedersen, Miloch and Laucella (2007), “sport communication is a dynamic process, one that is active and interactive,” and “receivers of the sports communication messages can accept or reject the message, intensity, direction, duration, or type of effects” (80). The senders and receivers could be coaches, student-athletes, sports information directors, fans, or other publics, but it is a two-way process that allows for feedback. There are also a number of variables before, during and after the communication process. As Pedersen et al. (2007), explain, these specifically include things such as, (before) knowledge levels, opinions, needs, expectancies, motivation, participation, (during) situation, filters, physical constitution, psychological constitution, evaluation of content, evaluation of communicator, agreement, disagreement, and (after) selectivity and capability of memory (81). Pedersen et al. (2007) created a Strategic Sport Communication Model (see Appendix, Figure 1) which “explains systematically and rationally the relationships among the key variables in sport communication” in a manner that is “both a process-based and structurally based approach” (85).

Impact of the Internet on Sport Communication

The proliferation of the Internet and social media in the United States has caused the model to shift, in some ways, because the sport mass media is not confined to simply sports journalists anymore. The “new media” component is becoming increasingly important because now anyone with access to the Internet can theoretically fulfill the role of “sports journalist,” meaning that particular segment is now even more massive.

In the broader scheme of things, the decrease in importance of sportswriters basically means that the “middle-man” in the basic communication process is being circumvented. Now

student-athletes and staff can bypass the media and produce (and disseminate) their own messages, with no editing or distortion from a third party. Fans can now go straight to the source to gain the insight and information they crave. As Jones (2009) puts it, “the divide regarding contact between the athlete and the fan, normally mediated by the sports reporter, is beginning to crumble.” He argues that the social media outbreak is perfect for sports because “sports fans want to feel a certain level of intimacy with their sports heroes, and the athletes no longer have to worry about having their words misconstrued (because they’re saying them themselves) or worry about the wrong message getting out there” (Jones, 2009). The shift also allows for a more direct avenue for feedback, so schools can now hear from their publics instantaneously through social media.

The role of the “middle-man” sports-journalist is not disappearing, but that role is certainly changing. As Reed (2011) found, “the rise of social media gives sports writers new avenues for gathering information... [raising] ethical issues that challenge an already technologically morphing industry” (43). There are also ethical questions about how much monitoring/controlling of social media the NCAA and/or its member institutions should have as a result of the changing landscape where journalists are beginning to treat players’ tweets like quotes in a press conference.

Social networks like Twitter, Facebook and potentially Google+ or others will continue to redefine how the sport communication process works in the years to come. Fry (2011) points out that many of the athletes on Twitter are “digital immigrants—they started tweeting after they were famous,” however, “very soon [athletes] will arrive who have used social media throughout their teens...for them, communicating via social media will be far more familiar than confronting a scrum of reporters.” Once that begins, there will be an even more significant shift in the model.

Social Media: The Gift and The Curse

Twitter: The Gift

Perhaps more than any other social media medium, Twitter has revolutionized communication between athletic departments, student-athletes, coaches and fans (and vice-versa). As previously mentioned, student-athletes, coaches and athletic departments can now communicate directly with fans from almost anywhere. Fans can often get an inside look at what goes on in the mind of their favorite coach or student-athlete, as well as staying current on scores and breaking news related to their school of choice. Recently, individual sports within a given athletic department have taken to Twitter, separate from the main athletics account, to provide even more specific and in-depth insight on a respective team.

Another advantage of Twitter is the fan interaction opportunities it can provide. Fans can use hash tags (generated organically or suggested by the team) to have a real-time conversation about a game or breaking news related to the school. Some schools, such as the University of Michigan, have even painted hash tags like “#GOBLUE” directly on the field to guide fans’ tweets (umichfootball, 2012). It is also a simple avenue for contests and giveaways for fans. At Elon University, for example, they have a contest in which fans at home football games can tweet their seat number to the athletic department’s Twitter handle for a chance to upgrade to a sideline pass for the remainder of the game. These contests cost nothing or next to nothing, which is always a positive for the cost-conscious athletic department, while also building goodwill with the fans and encouraging interaction.

A Twitter promotion from the NHL’s Pittsburgh Penguins, in partnership with Verizon and Erwin Penland advertising, may very well emerge in the college ranks in the near future. Known as “Penguins Pulse,” it is one of the world’s largest real-time Twitter visualizations. A

series of screens displayed popular topics/terms related to the game, top players mentioned, where and from whom the tweets originated, and calculated the mood of the fans—illustrated by an animated Penguin whose mannerisms would reflect the mood of the fan tweets. It might take a corporate sponsor, as the Penguins had, to make something like that feasible for a college game, or it could take on a simpler form. Schools could simply utilize all or part of an LCD (or similar) screen on the scoreboard to display something as simple as real-time tweets about the game, or as complicated as stats like the Penguins' visualization has. In either case, these constantly updating visualizations are yet another way to engage the fans while the game is going on, and have a richer experience when they come to the stadium.

Twitter: The (Potential) Curse

Student-athletes and administrators are both utilizing Twitter, though for largely different purposes. SID's and other administrators use Twitter to communicate with fans in order to build and grow the fan base. On the other hand, as Thomas (2011) notes, "Athletes rely on Twitter to share their thoughts, post pictures, make announcements and even relay inspirational messages to fans" (115). This is where many student-athletes can potentially get themselves in trouble.

Elon University senior running back Jamal Shuman exemplifies what can happen when Twitter is used with reckless abandon by a student-athlete. Shuman was upset after the Phoenix had lost 48-28 to Wofford College, and he had only one reception for five yards, so he took to Twitter to vent. Shuman unleashed a profanity-laden series of Tweets that criticized his coach and expressed his frustration. While he did not use his real name (see Figure 2), it was fairly evident who the account belonged to, especially since he linked to his real Facebook page, and he ranted without realizing that his tweets were public. Shuman began to realize that anyone

could see his rant when people he did not know started to tweet at him. He even realized by the end of his rant that he would be in trouble, tweeting that, “this is the world we live in today tho.” It is indeed the world we live in today, as his rant went viral and appeared on the popular sports blog, Deadspin.com, under the tag “athlete meltdowns,” where it has been viewed over 850,000 times and shared on Facebook more than 600 times. The tweets earned the running back an indefinite suspension that would prove to last the rest of the season, but, perhaps more importantly, it brought a lot of negative attention to the Elon football team and Shuman himself. Though Shuman would later offer a sincere string of apology tweets on his personal account, the damage had been done.

Shuman is just one instance among many examples of student-athletes using Twitter inappropriately. Some football coaches at major college programs, such as Boise State University, Kansas University and the University of South Carolina, decided to ban Twitter entirely. Kansas head coach Turner Gill explained his rationale for the ban was based on the notion that “we [the coaching staff] feel like it will prevent us from being able to prepare our football program to move forward. Simple as that” (qtd. in Rovell, 2011). Darren Rovell (2011) argues that Gill’s rationale goes too far because, “Under that umbrella, what also prevents players from being their best are the following: Dating, talking on the phone, texting, sending out e-mails. Make that doing anything that isn't playing or practicing football.” He also brings up the point that coaches and administration do not blame the paper itself when student-athletes say dumb things, yet they blame Twitter itself, because “it’s easy to do...but it’s also ignorant and unfair” (Rovell, 2011). Coaches and athletic departments as a whole are also missing a valuable learning opportunity for their student-athletes as well. While the stakes may be high if tweets cross the line and are seen by the wrong people, there are also a lot of benefits to the social

network that would seem to far outweigh the risks. Rovell (2011) goes on to write that coaches or sports information staffs should bring in someone to teach players how to use Twitter since, as he writes, “Odds are most players are going to get more out of learning how to use instantaneous publishing tools as compared to applying the actual plays they learn to their work life.” A ban is the easy way out, and perhaps that is doing the student-athletes a disservice.

It is interesting to note that there seems to be no real correlation with banning Twitter and winning games. Turner Gill, for example, was eventually fired at Kansas because his teams were not winning enough games. Thamel (2012) points out that the participants in the recent NCAA men’s basketball Final Four—Ohio State, Kentucky, Louisville and Kansas— “represent the many ways that athletic departments are handling the newest forms of mass communication.” Kentucky coach John Calipari has embraced Twitter and has over a million followers, while Louisville coach Rick Pitino chose to ban his team from using Twitter during the season (Thamel 2012). Meanwhile, Ohio State star player, Jared Sullinger, chose to implement a self-imposed Twitter ban to eliminate distractions (Thamel, 2012). With its head coach tweeting the entire way, Kentucky ended up winning the title. Coach Calipari even caused a minor stir on March 14th when he tweeted: “As I’ve said before, I have the greatest job in basketball at any level. Why would I be interested in another job? I love being the coach of the commonwealth’s team. To the #BBN & all the recruits that are coming or want to come, I will be at Kentucky” (ukcoachcalipari, 2012). While this sounds like good public relations, the fact that this was tweeted with no provocation from media questions or speculation made it gain attention and even stirred some speculation that was not previously there. Even with this minor distraction, it had no impact on his team’s performances. The teams that banned twitter, or stopped using it voluntarily—Louisville and Ohio State—both ended up losing in the semifinals. While most

would argue Kentucky won simply because they were more talented, twitter or not, it does help the case for allowing Twitter because banning it has not been shown to lead to significantly better results on the field. Teams seem to be handling it on a case by case basis, with mixed results on the field so far. Many coaches simply do not want the possibility of a distraction, and thus see no reason to allow it.

Elon University does have social media policies for its student-athletes, which is communicated to the athletes via the student-athlete handbook as well as through meetings at the beginning of each school year and required media training for all incoming freshmen student-athletes (Hodges, 2011). In Shuman's case, he did know the consequences of his rant, just not the extent to which he was sharing his profane frustrations. All indications are that there is no plan to ban any Phoenix student-athletes from using Twitter, though the Shuman incident will likely cause the athletic department to re-evaluate its teaching of responsible social media use. Coaches and the sports information staffs will need to monitor their student-athletes more carefully as well in order to help make sure they are not put in a situation like Shuman. As Rovell (2011) puts it, the issue of Twitter use by student-athletes is not about freedom of speech, it is about "proving that the biggest college sports can really be a teaching opportunity instead of just a multi-billion [dollar] enterprise in which everyone capitalizes except for the kids themselves." It is important to remember that most student-athletes are in fact still "kids" in many respects at age 18-22 and are still learning.

Sanderson (2011) suggests that when student-athletes post problematic social media content, they may merely be following presumed social norms for someone their age. He based that assumption on previous research done by Peluchette and Karl which found that 53% of college students' Facebook profiles contained pictures of alcohol consumption, 20% had

comments about sexual activity, 20% has seminude or sexually provocative photographs and 50% had profanity (Sanderson 2011, 496). That is why every major Division I athletic department has some sort of social media policy and/or social media training for its student-athletes. However, as Sanderson (2011) points out, that does not always solve the problem arguing, “the extent to which athletic departments work with student-athletes to manage social media will play a vital role in minimizing public relations incidents while simultaneously promoting harmonious partnerships” (510). Pegoraro (2010) found that athletes are talking predominately about their personal lives and responding to fans’ queries through Twitter, thus further indicating that Twitter is a powerful tool for increasing fan-athlete interaction when used appropriately.

The same could also be applied to the college athlete. Shuman is one example of a student-athlete being allowed to learn the hard way what the consequences of tweeting before one thinks can be. He learned a tough lesson, but college is all about learning from one’s mistakes in order to better prepare oneself for the future, and he probably will, as a result. Thomas (2011) suggests that, “when used responsibly, Twitter is an effective tool to bridge the gap between players and fans” (119). However, those same 140 characters can also keep SID’s awake at night because of the potential negative power they can have, as was the case with Shuman.

Facebook: Building Relationships, One ‘Like’ at a Time

Social media tools like Facebook can be useful in helping athletic departments reach their relationship-marketing goals (Williams and Chinn, 2010). According to Stavros et al. (2008), “the goals of relationship marketing are to build long-term relationships with the organization’s

best customers...[and] is also designed to contribute to strengthening brand awareness, increase understanding of consumer needs, enhance loyalty, and provide additional value for consumers (qtd. in Williams and Chinn, 2010, 423). Facebook allows schools to influence and promote their teams for free, create buzz and initiate social interaction with their fans, all of which are some of the defining characteristics of marketing with new media (Hill and Moran, 2011, 821).

Whether a Facebook page has close to a million 'likes,' such as a big program like the University of Texas, or a smaller school like Elon University, with under 5,000 'likes,' many of the characteristics are quite similar. Regardless of size, many athletic departments use Facebook to have interactions with fans and drive traffic back to the school's athletics website content (Wallace, et al., 2011). That is, much of the content posted on their respective pages is links to external content, typically based on the main athletics website. Facebook, for the most part, simply serves as a vehicle to allow its fans to more easily find, comment on and share content that the sports information staffs generate. Instead of having to constantly check the school's athletics website for the latest stories, videos, etc. one can simply 'like' the athletic department's Facebook page and stay connected through a social network they are apt to frequent anyway to stay current with other aspects of their lives. Simply put, "social media web sites provide a strategic means for college and university athletic departments to build and maintain a strong brand presence when cultivating relationships with Facebook users" (Wallace et al. 2011, 422).

Wallace, Wilson and Miloch (2011) found in their analysis of Big XII Conference Facebook pages that the brand associations used the following brand associations most frequently: rivalry 39%, brand mark (image has a logo or recognizable image) 37%, team success 34%, stadium community 21% and socialization (discussion with fans or questions, pictures of fans or group) 19% (434). The brand associations used least frequently were

commitment (support, loyalty, commitment showing support, thanking fans) 4% and organizational attributes (charity, goodwill, positive characteristics) 5% (434). These findings indicate that the spirit of competition, teams doing well, and associating the logos/recognizable images of the athletics programs tend to be more important than more virtuous content about loyalty and giving back. Schools want to be associated with winning, and that is largely what is being shared through its social media presence. This is important because, as Wallace, Wilson and Miloch (2011) put it, “the Facebook sport experience is shaped by not only the communication tools and the management of these tools but also the content expressed in these formats” (436).

The Rise of Big Brother: Protecting a Brand or Invading Privacy?

Whiteside, Hardin and Ash (2011) contend, “There is no denying the potential that many universities see in the exploding commercial value of their athletic programs” (473). This is evidenced by the recent 14-year, \$11 billion deal the NCAA signed with CBS and Turner Sports for the right to broadcast its men’s basketball tournament, commonly known as March Madness (Whiteside et al. 2011, 473). With that much money at stake, it has become even more critical for schools to protect their respective brands. Wallace, Wilson and Miloch (2011) point out that scholars have long linked brand identity and brand management to enhanced loyalty among consumers and sports fans, so it is vital that any communications that are associated with the brand are both appropriate and effective in an interpersonal sense (423). This has put such a premium on making sure student athletes are using social media responsibly that it is beginning to raise ethical concerns.

While many schools simply rely on teaching best-practices for social media to their student athletes, for others it is not enough. These schools tend to be from larger conferences where football and men's basketball are vitally important to the school's revenue-stream. Major universities like the University of North Carolina, the University of Nebraska and Oklahoma University are paying as much as \$10,000 annually to companies like Varsity Monitor to keep an online eye on their athletes (Thamel, 2012). According to CEO Sam Carnahan, the service "[looks] for things that could damage the school's brand and anything related to [a student athlete's] eligibility" (qtd. in Thamel, 2012).

The schools would argue it is in their best interests to monitor because of the implications it can have in terms of both public perception and the bottom line. There have even been instances where social media posts have led to investigations from the NCAA for major rules violations. This happened recently at North Carolina, when tweet from a highly-touted player, Marvin Austin, revealed that he was receiving impermissible benefits and caused the NCAA to launch an investigation (Thamel, 2012). That investigation led to a number of violations being brought to light, multiple suspensions, head coach Butch Davis being fired, and eventually a one-year bowl ban and loss of 15 scholarships (Thamel, 2012). Unlike the aforementioned situation with Jamal Shuman, this instance of poor judgment on Twitter cost North Carolina a tremendous amount in lost revenues, losses on the field because of key player suspensions, and it was a black mark on an athletic department with a relatively clean record with the NCAA. This case is also notable because the NCAA's statement about North Carolina's punishment "hinted that institutions should be tracking public information made available by student athletes if there is a 'reasonable suspicion of rules violations'" (Thamel, 2012). Other athletic departments took note, and as a result, companies like Varsity Monitor have seen an increase in business.

This brings into question whether it is ethical, or even legal, for schools to engage in such practices. Advocates for students' rights, such as sports law and social media lawyer Bradley S. Shear, argue that, "the Supreme Court has ruled over and over again that students do not leave their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gate," and he contends that any policy that requires students to give access to "password-protected electronic content" is "a clear violation of their First and Fourth Amendment Constitutional rights" (Thamel, 2012). Meanwhile schools like the University of Florida, where only football players are monitored by a third-party, try to downplay what many would consider a violation of rights. Florida athletic director Jeremy Foley said, "I'm not a big believer that it's our responsibility to monitor that 24-7. If there's an issue, we'll deal with it. We're trying to run a business here. We're not trying to be Big Brother" (Thamel, 2012). Foley's quote illustrates the dilemma that faces many major college athletics programs. They probably do not want to be "Big Brother," but because they are "trying to run a business," as Foley put it, they are almost forced to play a "Big Brother" role to some extent because they are running it with a business-like approach, rather than a more educational approach. Indeed, the approach of administrations to the regulating of social media by its student athletes might have something to do with the backlash.

Many businesses monitor their employee's use of the Internet and social media, yet it is widely accepted in most cases without much objection, and they rarely, if ever, have any social media controversies. While this can certainly be partially attributed to maturity that comes with being older and more mature than the average student athlete when one is hired at a real world business, it is more telling that the employees chose to accept it, even though on the surface it is not much different from what some athletic departments are doing. Sanderson (2011) suggests that the findings of Watkins Allen, Coopman, Hart and Walker (2007) are applicable in this case

(497). They applied Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM), which at its core, “positions communication as a goal-oriented task” to explain why employees are willing to accept organizational surveillance (Sanderson, 2011, 497). Their observations suggest that, “privacy boundaries were constructed during new-hire orientation, through narratives that presented surveillance as a beneficial practice for both the employee and the organization. Through these narratives employees were socialized to accept organizational monitoring” (Sanderson, 2011, 497). This led Sanderson (2011) to contend that “when directives about social media use are constructed and disseminated unilaterally (as is likely the case with student athletes), tensions are likely to result (497). Thus, perhaps partially explaining why student athletes might have a harder time accepting strict social media policies and/or monitoring by their respective institutions. Schools should pay more attention to how they are framing their social media policies, and why they are being implemented, in order for them to be more effective. Sanderson (2011) even goes so far as to suggest that there should be “a more equitable policy balance and for athletic departments to get student athletes more involved in social media strategy” (508). That way, “Big Brother” would become more like a supportive mentor than an oppressive regulator.

Conclusions

College athletic departments tend to be more reactive than proactive to changes in communication and technology. They are rarely, if ever, among the early adopters of social media sites/tools. This is exemplified by the fact that few schools have a presence, and even less a significant presence, on emerging sites like Google+. The fact that massive athletic departments, like the University of Florida and the University of California at Los Angeles have no official presence on Google+ indicates that schools have not figured out how to use it, and are

likely waiting to see how it develops before expanding their efforts to yet another social network. The methods may evolve, eventually, but being social is a trend that will continue to grow and become more important as fans get increasingly hyperconnected. The sport communication model is continuing to change, and it seems most athletic departments are leaning towards simply reacting to the change, rather than really driving the evolution.

Because collegiate athletic departments are typically not among the early adopters of social media, it has caused many schools to be much more reactive than proactive in their social media practices and policies. By now, most schools have been able to understand the gifts of social media as it relates to relationship marketing and communicating and connecting with fans in new ways. However, schools' understanding and managing of the potential curses of social media has been a bit more convoluted. SID's fear the potential for NCAA investigations or other negative press, and many coaches are worried that it will be distracting. Both have been guilty, in some instances, of failing to realize the potential positives of social media and working to teach their student athletes how to use the tools responsibly, instead of locking them away. Better understanding is needed from administration to coaches to student athletes, so that best practices for social media can be mutually agreed upon and implemented without any resentment or hostility. There is too much of a culture of fear surrounding student athlete's use of social media and not enough support. Many athletic departments are reaping the benefits of sound social media practices, and it is time that more of them pass that along to the student athletes instead of trying to police all of the time.

Educating best practices is only part of a sound social media strategy for collegiate athletics, however. Schools should be pro-active in their own social media tactics to build a brand, as well as relationships, that can withstand a crisis. Elon has not been affected in the long-term by

Shuman's tweets, and North Carolina has been able to withstand its NCAA troubles stemming from social media because they stayed the course and trusted the relationships they had built with their publics.

The importance of these relationships can also be seen in recent scandals at both Syracuse University and Penn State University. Though the crises did not originate from a rogue tweet or some other misuse of social media, the story, as well as people's opinion certainly spread via social media very quickly. That is yet another reason why social media, in particular, can be such a mixed blessing. It also shows the need to utilize social media tools to stay in front of a crisis, and to respond quickly and decisively to the issues. It is becoming increasingly difficult for schools to hide their secrets in the digital age, whether it is allegations of sexual abuse or potential NCAA violations, as Ohio State University and the University of Miami (FL) have seen. Responding swiftly and directly, utilizing social media tools, can make potential crises much easier to navigate. News, good or bad, will continue to spread with more and more efficiency in the future, so time is of the essence. The image of a school and its athletic department has ripple effects on recruiting, in particular. Syracuse has reportedly already had a recruit de-commit after the allegations of sexual abuse surfaced (New York Post, 2011). Therefore it is imperative for collegiate athletic departments to plan and study tactics being employed by public relations firms to learn the best ways to respond without having to hire a firm to do it for them, as Penn State chose to do when it hired Ketchum to help them navigate its crisis (Bruell, 2011). It is in these crisis situations that having a strong social media can be a powerful ally, which will, again, become even more imperative in the more hyperconnected future of sport communication. Fans and other publics are critical to everything an athletic department does, so building and maintaining those relationships is critical. Today's proactive

consumer, or “prosumer” as Williams and Chinn (2010) call it, actively uses Web 2.0 technologies to engage in increasing levels of collaboration and interactivity with organizations (423). This gives athletic departments an opportunity to interact with their fans in new and more engaging ways, but it also means those same prosumers are going to be actively consuming the potential negative aspects of social media. To put it simply that is the gift and the curse of social media.

While the methodologies and mediums for connecting with fans/publics will continue evolve as emerging technologies become adopted, the principles, ethics and messages remain largely the same. It will be important for sports information/media relations staffs not to lose sight of that as the tools and tactics of tomorrow become the tools and tactics of today. The rewards of social media ultimately outweigh the potential crises, which is why it will continue to play an important role in the integrated marketing communications strategies of every college athletics department.

Appendix

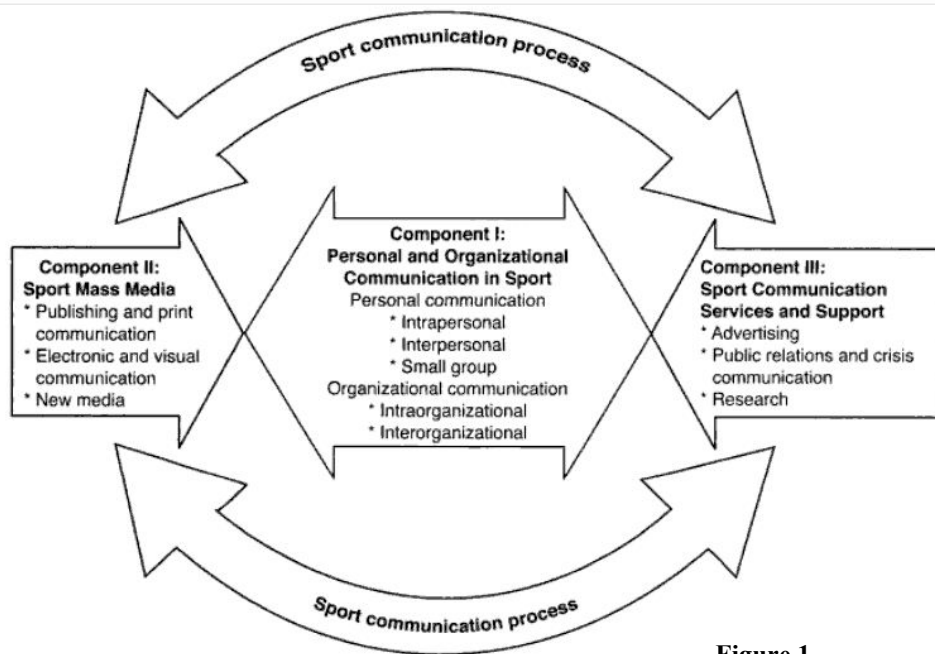


Figure 1

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