

**The Changing Work Routines and Labour Practices of Sports Journalists in
the Digital Era: A Case Study of Postmedia**

by

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Abstract

The Canadian newspaper industry is changing rapidly, as convergence, concentration and digitization have eroded the daily newspaper's once prominent place in the media hierarchy, to a position that is increasingly marginalized by expanding digital news sources. Daily newspaper's sports coverage has been particularly affected by both trends impacting the newspaper industry, as well as the growing power of major-league sport organizations to generate their own digital content. Using extensive interviews with Postmedia sports journalists, this research explored how sports journalists from across the Postmedia newspaper chain have seen their work routines and labour practices change in the digital era. Utilizing a cultural-economic theoretical framework, this research highlighted how newspapers continue to pursue the lucrative male audience commodity through expanding major-league sport coverage, while simultaneously experiencing significant change within the media sports cultural complex, as mainstream media's longstanding and mutually beneficial relationship with major-league sport is altered.

Keywords: newspapers, digitization, sports journalism

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Evan Daum. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Convergence, concentration and digitization: A case study of the work routines and labour practices of Postmedia sports journalists,” Study ID Pro00043268, October 22, 2013.

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‘That sounds like a fun job.’ It was a response I heard countless times when people learned of my job as a sports reporter for the *Edmonton Journal*. Over my two years at the Journal, I experienced plenty of rewarding moments, working with talented people who cared deeply about their careers and the newspaper industry itself. And while I learned plenty about sports and journalism during my time there—which ended in July 2013—the image I took away from my brief stint as a professional journalist was not a rosy one. Instead, I saw that the Canadian newspaper industry, as we know it at least, is in the midst of changes, the likes of which the industry has never seen before.

The newspaper industry, like countless others since the recession of 2008, has been struggling to pick itself up and move forward after its outdated economic foundation was washed away. A ‘pay for content’ approach has always been central to the financial success of the daily newspaper, which in addition to advertising revenue, relies on subscription fees in order to generate revenue. However, the advent of online news, which until recently had been provided free of charge by the very same newspaper outlets that charge for their paper copies, has led to a decline in both print subscriptions and advertising, especially as advertisers have shifted their focus online and to a much broader array of promotional sources.¹ The newspaper industry has attempted to cope with

¹ Postmedia enacted a chain-wide pay wall, a system that makes individuals pay to access online content, in May 2013 in an attempt to monetize its online content. While additional revenue has been created through the advent of digital subscription fees, at \$9.95 per month, these fees pale in comparison to the cost of a print subscription (known as the all-access subscription, as this subscription also allows for digital access), which costs more than double at \$31.50 per month.

changing economic realities through the most unimaginative means possible—mainly cutting jobs.² This is the death of the newspaper in its crudest form, and I got a brief glimpse of this reality from the inside as colleagues were quietly whisked out the door on a consistent basis for two years. The sports department at the *Journal* was not spared from Postmedia’s uninspired restructuring plan, as several ‘deskiers’—a term for those who edit stories and lay out pages—were sent packing after the Sunday print edition was cut in May 2012. Desk operations, like nightly editing and page layout, were further centralized in Hamilton as part of Postmedia’s restructuring plans. As I saw the media landscape changing around me, I embarked on this research process seeking to understand the central question of how media convergence, concentration, and digitization have altered the work routines and labour practices of sports journalists in the Postmedia empire. I had no idea what answers my research and my interviews with sports journalists would yield, although having been a sports journalist for a brief snapshot in time, I knew I had some insight to share about the job and what it entailed. Still, with only two years of experience, I did not truly understand the job, let alone what it used to be. Through this research, my understanding of the newspaper industry and its unique relationship with major-league sport has become far clearer, pointing me towards the conclusion that ultimately

Thus, added digital subscription revenue has been outpaced by print subscription losses.

² One of the recent high profile round of newspaper layoffs came in July 2013, when Quebecor-owned Sun Media Corp. announced the closing of 11 publications, resulting in the loss of 360 jobs. Other methods for cost cutting have included the elimination of print editions, like the *Journal* axing its popular, yet bulky Sunday print edition in 2012.

newspapers' longstanding historical and mutually beneficial relationship with major-league sport – the media sport cultural complex (Rowe, 2004) – has been fundamentally altered by the trio of convergence, concentration, and digitization.

Traditionally a symbiotic relationship, the connection between newspapers and major-league sport has experienced a significant shift since the rise of digitization. In the decades predating digitization, newspapers and other forms of mass media were necessities for major-league sport in generating publicity and cultivating fans (Koppett, 1981; McChesney, 1989; White, 1996). While newspapers have historically provided tremendous amounts of 'free' publicity for major-league sport, the industry itself has also benefitted heavily from major-league sport coverage, which has proven to deliver a valuable audience commodity—male, affluent readers—that was then sold to advertisers (Lowes, 1999). The symbiotic relationship that has existed between the two parties, however, has been turned on its head as a result of digitization. Digitization can be defined simply as the ability to share content digitally (Negroponte, 1995). The rise of digital content has been transformative for the newspaper industry, which has been forced to struggle with the pressures of delivering news online in a 24/7 environment, the emergence of new competition on the Internet, and specifically within the context of sports, competition with sport organizations themselves for readers. Indeed, as teams have developed their digital capabilities, newspapers have been marginalized in major-league sport news delivery, as individual teams and leagues as a whole opt to use their own digital channels to share news and

connect with their fans and, in some instances, generate their own advertising revenue (Scherer & Jackson, 2008).

In addition to digitization, convergence and concentration have played significant roles in the shifting landscape for the newspaper industry. Convergence has been defined in several different ways with respect to the newspaper industry, but as an economic strategy, it allows media companies to publish centrally across multiple platforms to increase productivity and marketing (Quinn, 2005). Convergence has also led to the rise of the ‘multimedia’ journalist, who works to produce content for a host of platforms in a 24/7 news environment (Compton, 2004). Concentration is closely tied to convergence, and refers to the increasing trend of cross-media mergers, as newspapers are increasingly controlled as part of much larger corporations that often own vast media assets in print, television, and radio. This pattern, which Postmedia’s predecessor Canwest pursued aggressively through its acquisitions of print and television outlets in the first few years of the 21st century, is closely tied to the hyper-commercialism of journalism in which media companies of increasing size strive to maximize their advertising revenue stream (McChesney, 2004).

Collectively the trends of convergence, concentration and digitization have fundamentally altered the newspaper industry and in the context of this study, how the chain of Postmedia conducts its business and how its employees cover sport. These three trends have had various outcomes for Postmedia, including significant job cuts, an increasing emphasis on digital news delivery, and for sports journalists, fundamentally different work routines and labour

practices than those of the generations that came before. As Mark Lowes (1999, p. 6) explained, sports journalism has developed a set of institutionalized work routines, which collectively form “a distinctive set of patterns and rules of conduct” that have been able to persist over an extended period of time. With respect to sport, these unwritten rules translated into sports news becoming standardized “such that day after day it is almost exclusively about a small group of male-dominated professional sports” (Lowes, 1999, p. 6). With the rise of convergence, concentration and digitization, the institutionalized work routines of sports journalists are being transformed, as sports sections must cope with significant changes to the patterns and rules of conduct that have governed their daily work routines for more than a century.

It was the aim of this research, therefore, to gain a better understanding of how the broader, material structural developments associated with convergence, concentration and digitization have impacted the institutionalized work routines of Canadian sports journalists by undertaking a case study of Postmedia. I interviewed 14 different Postmedia sports journalists from eight Postmedia newspapers between fall 2013 and spring 2014. In doing so, I have examined how media convergence, concentration, and digitization have altered the work routines and labour practices of sports journalists in the Postmedia empire in significant, but subjective ways. In addition to this central question, this research explored three additional sub-questions:

- 1) How has the political-economic landscape of the newspaper industry in Canada changed since the rise of digitization?

- 2) In what ways have Postmedia sports journalists negotiated the new sets of limits and pressures that have accompanied convergence, concentration, and digitization?
- 3) How have Postmedia sports journalists' roles changed since the advent of social media and the rise of team-produced content, which has followed the rise of digitization?

In pursuing these questions, it is the goal of this research to gain a better understanding of how work routines and labour practices have changed for Postmedia sports journalists in the digital era and ultimately add my own findings to the growing amount of critical literature focused on sports journalism within the sociology of sport community. Building on the work of scholars such as Hutchins and Rowe (2012), who recently examined sports journalism since the rise of convergence, and Lowes (1999), who examined the historical production of Canadian newspaper sports sections and the pursuit of the audience commodity, this thesis adds an important piece to the academic conversation surrounding sports journalism in the 21st century. Indeed, by using the work of Hutchins and Rowe, Lowes and others who have documented the development of sports journalism as a theoretical and methodological platform (Goldlust, 1988; Koppett, 1981; McChesney, 1989), this research will explore not only how journalists are trying to adapt to an industry in financial flux, but also one that is witnessing its historically close and symbiotic relationship with major-league sport evolve into one in which major-league sport organizations are increasingly

self-reliant to tell their own stories and control their own publicity and commercial messages.

Tracing the Canadian Sports Pages from Print to the Digital Era

No 21st-century newspaper would be complete without a sports section. The sports section has been an essential piece of the newspaper industry, and indeed, of the mass media industry as a whole, for over a century. Radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and more recently, blogs and websites, dedicate significant time and space to covering and discussing major-league sport. However, sport did not always have a key place in the media. It was only in the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century that sports journalism emerged in newspapers – an emergence that occurred nearly simultaneously with the expansion and development of major-league sport organizations. A strong relationship between newspapers and major-league sport solidified, as both worked to promote and commercialize sport in North America. As Lowes (1999) explains, sport as an entertainment industry has developed over time:

[T]here is nothing at all ‘natural’ about this state of affairs—I want to *denaturalize* what is too often taken for granted as immutable [...] major-league sports and their superstar celebrities are the products of our mass-media culture—in conjunction with marketing and promotions, extensive media coverage manufactures major-league sports, and to a great extent, our perceptions of them. (1999, p. 4-5)

This chapter will trace the historical relationship between major-league sport and newspapers, attempting to explain the production of the sport entertainment industry. Starting with examining the emergence of advertising in the newspaper business, a greater understanding can be gained as to why newspapers and major-league sport have fostered a cozy relationship and how this mutually beneficial relationship has ultimately led to major-league sport content dominating newspaper sports sections across North America. Central to the discussion of advertising's value to newspapers and their relationship with major-league sport is the concept of the audience commodity. As articulated by Lowes, "media audiences are assigned commercial value by media organizations and sold to advertisers" with the main goal for the news industry "to consistently produce high-value audience commodity at a low cost to sell to advertisers in order to maximize revenue and profits" (Lowes, 1999, p. 17). The concept of the audience commodity dates back to the 1970s and the work of Smythe (1977), who argued that the only commodity produced by the media was the audience, and the actual production of content used to attract the audience is of secondary importance. As this chapter will illustrate, the pursuit of the audience commodity has been the driving force behind the emergence of newspapers' robust sports coverage, as sport provided newspapers with a clearly defined audience commodity of affluent adult men, which could be sold to advertisers. Newspapers pursued sports coverage, ultimately helping build major-league sport in North America. The growth of major-league sport in turn set the stage for the rapid expansion of sports journalism during the golden age of the 1920s, and onwards, during which time

the work practices of sports journalists hinged on the relationship they cultivated with the major leagues they covered. Over the course of more than a century, the aligned interests of newspapers and major-league sport have combined to form the “media sports cultural complex” (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 8). Coined by Rowe, this term is used to “capture the interrelationship between sport, cultural symbols, and the social formations of which they are a part of (2012, p. 8).” By better acknowledging the well-established relationship between newspapers and major league sport within the context of the media sports cultural complex, it becomes possible to understand why sport sections are now almost universally focused on major-league sport. The relationship with major-league sport as both a partner and the subject of coverage has drawn criticism from some regarding the role of sports journalism in the task of journalism as the fourth estate. In addition to examining the mutually beneficial relationship that emerged between newspapers and major-league sport, this chapter will also set the foundation for an exploration of how newspaper’s close relationship with major-league sport is beginning to be challenged. The trend of digitization, which has led to an increasingly convergent and concentrated media landscape, has impacted the traditionally close relationship between major-league sport and newspapers, ultimately impacting the day-to-day work practices of sports journalists.

Creating the Commodity: Advertising and the Emergence of Sports

Journalism

Beginning in the 19th century, newspapers and major-league sport

organizations found themselves aligned in an evolving marketplace, and numerous developments prompted a partnership between the two. For newspapers, lower technology costs allowed them to print copies at a far cheaper rate, resulting in the emergence of people's journals, or the penny press. Canada's "renaissance of the popular press," as historian Rutherford termed it, led to the rapid expansion of newspapers across the country during the late stages of the 19th century, with the country experiencing a threefold increase in the number of newspapers between 1874 and 1900 (Rutherford, 1978, p. 49). The growth of newspapers as a medium led to a second, related development that had a significant impact on the early newspaper industry. With newspapers accessible to the masses, they became a valuable tool for advertisers trying to reach a wider audience (Lowes, 1999; McChesney, 1989). The creation of new 'wants' became a hallmark of manufacturers during this period, with publicity needed to generate consumer acceptance and demand, and therefore marketing expenses became part of a firm's cost of production (Chamberlain, 1962). Retail companies seeking a competitive advantage were increasingly turning to newspaper advertising as a means to drive sales, and newspapers were all too eager to provide the advertising space these companies were seeking (McChesney, 1989). As Rutherford (1978) notes in his book *The Making of the Canadian Media*, print journalism emerged as a powerful part of Canada's industrial economy during the first few decades of the 20th century, with print advertising generating \$50 million in revenue combined for newspapers and periodicals in 1929. Advertising, which up until the latter half of the 19th century had been treated as merely a supplementary form of

revenue, was now emerging as the primary revenue stream for many newspapers, which began to focus on selling clearly defined target groups (the audience commodity) to advertisers, rather than selling the newspaper itself (Lowes, 1999; Leiss et. al, 1997).

This change to the business model had real, material implications on the content in newspapers. In order to attract advertisers, newspapers needed content that could deliver specific readers. In short, they needed to deliver an audience commodity, which Smythe argues is the only commodity produced by the media, with the actual production of content simply a means to attract the commodity (Smythe, 1977). The most successful of newspapers utilized new layouts, photographs and sensational headlines to attract readers (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993; McChesney, 1989). Newspapers also began to actively seek content that would appeal to as many readers as possible. Newspapers, which up until this point had focused on catering to the interests—both sporting and otherwise—of the upper class, were now aiming their business strategies at capturing an entirely new segment of the population, mainly working and middle-class consumers. Thus, advertising began to play a growing role in the revenue model and financial health of newspapers. Sport, as a predominantly male domain, had the potential to attract a wide, male audience from across classes, and this was its greatest strength (Lowes, 1999). In the 19th century, men were the main economic drivers and leading decision makers within a household. Capturing the male audience commodity meant capturing the only audience with any commercial value at the time. In recent history, the value of the female audience has shifted, with

advertisers increasingly working to capture the female audience commodity beginning in the 1960s (Meehan, 2006). However, during the rise of the newspaper, it was the male audience that had the most value to advertisers; thus, it was sports coverage that proved most lucrative to newspapers. Newspapers began to work to cultivate the ‘right’ audience commodity to sell to advertisers, and this financial goal became the driving force behind their extensive sports coverage: “financial success in the newspaper industry turns on a paper’s ability to deliver quality audiences—highly concentrated, homogeneous audiences—in large numbers” (Lowes, 1999, p. 19).

In fact, by the late 1880s, newspapers were turning to sports coverage to bring in both readers and dollars. Therefore, unsurprisingly, newspapers themselves became fully implicated in the promotion of major-league sport, dedicating significant space to sports coverage (McChesney, 1989). More sporting events meant more fans, and more fans meant more potential readers looking to get their sport fix from their local newspaper. Of course, later in the 20th century, television emerged as especially effective in capitalizing on the male audience commodity, most notably with all-sports channels in Canada like The Sports Network and later Sportsnet.³ As Lowes notes, regardless of the medium, the male audience commodity remains lucrative:

Clearly the news industry, be it the daily press or television, genders its sports coverage in the pursuit of advertising revenue. The sports section is

³ Rogers \$5.2-billion contract to land the National Hockey League’s Canadian national broadcasting rights serves as the perfect example of the value placed by Canadian media companies on the male audience commodity and the ability of sports to attract this audience.

a masculine domain, catering to a male audience with whom a male-dominated spectacle has been an immensely effective marketing strategy.

(1999, p. 23)

With this goal in mind, newspapers have developed a business model relying on the delivery of the male audience commodity to advertisers. A later chapter will explore the significant role of advertising in the business model of Postmedia, and how a decrease in advertising revenue has impacted the chain. However, in the early 20th century, when this new business model emerged, sport played a critical role in helping newspapers deliver the audience commodity, and thus sports coverage began its rapid expansion, helping build major-league sport in the process.

Building an Industry: Fostering Major-League Sport

Historically, while newspapers have certainly benefited from the audience commodity captured through sport coverage, the positive impact of newspapers on major-league sport organizations has also been substantial. No partner has played a more significant role in the growth of major-league sport in North America and its rise to cultural and commercial prominence than the mass media. According to Lowes there are, in simple terms, two types of sport. There is sport that exists for the sake of physical benefits and the joy of participants. This type of sport is not considered lucrative industry. Then, there is major-league sport: an industry, based on entertainment and spectacle, and more accurately called athletic entertainment (Lowes, 1999). The first type of sport—sport in its purest

form—would continue to exist without the existence of mass media. However, the continued success of athletic entertainment is contingent on the coverage provided by the media:

[T]he existence of sport does not depend on media coverage. But the continued existence and success of intense major-league sporting spectacle *does*. Again, it is crucial to recognize that the only way the producers of spectacle can reach a critical mass of consumers is through the mass media. Expansive media coverage is key to successful sports promotion: the objective is to get people excited about your entertainment product. (Lowes, 1999, p. 12)

When it comes to the early development of major-league sport in North America and the growing narrative of capitalism, consumerism and marketing, no sport is more intertwined with the media than baseball during its rise to prominence. The year 1862 marked the beginning not only of baseball's emergence as a commercial spectacle, but also a key moment in the rise of commercialism in the United States as a whole. The first department store in the United States opened in 1862 in Manhattan, and coincided with William Cammeyer developing America's first enclosed baseball field in Brooklyn, starting what would become known as the enclosure movement, or the rise of fenced grounds which charged admission fees to spectators (Rader, 2008). The 1860s marked the emergence of major-league sport in America, with the game of baseball becoming a fully commercial enterprise by the end of the decade. An entirely new ambience around the once fraternal game emerged, despite the frustrations of both proponents of amateurism

and newspapers alike, with the Philadelphia *Sunday Mercury* complaining in 1867, “instead of legitimate trials of skill between clubs, we had conflicts in which animosities were engendered, gambling was fostered, and from which arose the effort to make ball-playing a regular business occupation” (Rader, 2008, p. 26). While baseball was North America’s first major-league sport, and received newspaper coverage during its earliest period of growth, extensive coverage did not emerge until the 1920s, which soon became sport journalism’s golden era and will be discussed in the coming pages. As Rader notes in his extensive history of baseball in America, newspapers and major-league sport became even more tightly connected during this decade, as new technologies like action photography in newspapers, and columns from athletes themselves became staples of newspaper sports sections (Rader, 2008).⁴ The value of newspapers to the emergence of major-league baseball during the 20th century cannot be understated. As White (1996) explains, the newspaper industry and major-league baseball developed a uniquely close and beneficial relationship after the turn of the 20th century:

[D]espite the decline in the monolithic status of newspapers as sources of general information for the public, and a decline in the economic fortunes of the newspaper industry, baseball journalists remained professional baseball’s most significant publicity agent for the first five decades of the

⁴ Newspaper columns written ‘by’ athletes became a valuable business. Christy Walsh, a cartoonist and ghostwriter, established a ghost writing service for athletes and celebrities, with Babe Ruth among his most notable clients. Walsh and his stable of ghost writers wrote newspaper and magazine pieces allegedly by Ruth for well over a decade (Rader, 2008).

twentieth century. Moreover, baseball journalists and the clubs they covered remained in a symbiotic relationship that was not approximated in any other American professional sport. Journalistic coverage of major-league games was big business for the clubs being covered and for the newspapers covering them. (1996, p. 204)

The increasing coverage of sports like baseball during the late 1800s and early 1900s helped foster the development of the modern athletic entertainment we see today. Major-league sport organizations relied on newspapers to cultivate new fans and engage with existing fans. As Lowes explains, the relationship between newspapers and major-league sport is, thus, central in the production of fans:

Media coverage is instrumental in the making of fans, since it is primarily through the mass media that the producers and consumers of sporting spectacle touch each other. In this sense, the mass media are the lynch-pin holding together the various components of the sports entertainment industry. (1999, p. 9)

The crucial role of the media was beginning to crystalize at the dawn of the 20th century, as the media became essential in providing not only information, but more importantly for sport organizations, an attachment to teams and free publicity (Koppett, 1981; McChesney, 1989; White, 1996). Media coverage helped build attachments between fans and their favourite teams, players and leagues in general. For the most avid fans, no piece of information about their favourite team is too small and the newspaper industry has consistently fed the insatiable appetite of fans, with even the most mundane and ultimately

meaningless bits of sporting information garnering significant coverage, to the ultimate benefit of the major-league sport industry. Beginning with the previewing of games, newspapers serve to generate interest in sporting events, drawing readers into the storylines and intrigue surrounding the given event. More interest leading up to the event means the potential for more paying spectators, which is one of the most revenue streams of sport organizations. Covering the event itself and discussing the result are also common in newspaper coverage. As Wenner (1989) points out, after a sporting event, newspapers provide the recap and insight fans are looking for: “after a contest has been played, the sports pages recap these same themes, placing the game and its heroes into a ‘fantasy world’ that both sports writers and fans have had a hand in creating” (Wenner, 1989, p. 15).

Newspapers have aided in the creation of athletic entertainment over the years not by simply providing coverage of major-league sport, but also through the spectacular tone of that continuous coverage. Big stories with larger than life characters are nothing new to newspapers and do not reside solely in the sports pages, but without question, sport has been a healthy breeding ground for sensationalism over the years, dating back to the 1800s. One of the earliest proponents of sensationalism in the press was James Gordon Bennett, the founder and publisher of the *New York Herald*, who saw the practice as a means of generating circulation (McChesney, 1989). By creating characters, newspaper’s coverage of sport has helped provide a unique form of entertainment and intrigue in the daily press to cultivate large audiences. As Lowes puts it, “[w]ithout this

emotion generated by the media, the sports business would collapse” (1999, p. 12). The continuous nature of major-league sport has also served both newspapers and sport organizations well. Major-league sport provides a steady stream of content to sell to readers and, in turn, a steady supply of readers to sell to advertisers. Training camps, pre-season games, regular season games, playoffs and even off-season events (amateur drafts, awards shows) are all geared towards feeding fan’s interest on a constant basis. All of these events have garnered ritualistic coverage from newspapers over the years, who have been eager to promote even the most trivial developments to provide their audience with content newspapers know fans will happily consume. Major-league sport organizations strive to be in the headlines on a never-ending basis, with their very success in many ways hinging on their ability to secure constant coverage of their activities (Lowes, 1999).

In order to ensure the devotion of fans and never-ending media coverage, major-league sport has devoted considerable effort to fostering relationships with newspapers over the years. Assuring constant coverage of a sport organization and a healthy relationship between the media and the sport organization has emerged as a full-time and pivotal job within every major-league sport organization, as public relations employees are now a central part of major-league sport organizations. Sports editors have typically viewed public relations employees favourably over the years, as these individuals have served to help aid in the production of content (Pincus et. al, 1993). These public relations officials have worked to shape the conversation surrounding their organization in a variety

of ways, with the ultimate goal of generating positive coverage in the press. As one public relations employee put it, getting a story in the newspaper is “the best advertisement in the world” (Lowes, 1999, p. 13). The symbiotic relationship between major-league sport and newspapers led to a significant expansion of sports coverage and sports departments across North America, ultimately heralding the golden age of sports journalism.

The Golden Age of Sports Journalism

While sports coverage began slowly, when the newspaper industry realized the power of sport in producing an audience commodity to sell to advertisers, full-time sports departments quickly began to emerge. The earliest forms of sports coverage in North America date back to the early 1700s, when intermittent sports coverage could be found in American newspapers, with coverage of horse racing, prize fighting, boat racing, fishing, hunting, golf and cricket (Goldlust, 1988).⁵ In Canada, some of the earliest newspaper sports coverage can be traced back to the 1860s, when professional baseball from the United States was the primary sport of interest, while Canada’s pastime of hockey did not begin to dominate the sports pages of Canadian newspapers until the mid-1930s (Morrow & Wamsley, 2010).⁶ However, as the 20th century approached, the growing popularity of major-league sport and the increasing reliance of newspapers on the sport-delivered audience

⁵ The first sports story in an American newspaper was published on May 5, 1733, when the *Boston Gazette* ran a story on a prize fight (Goldlust, 1988).

⁶ Of note, the rise of Canadian newspaper hockey coverage, corresponds with a period of increased professionalization within the game. The eventual triumph of professional hockey over the amateur ranks cemented the game as the primary focus of Canadian newspaper’s sports departments.

commodity heralded the development of fully fledged sports departments (McChesney, 1989). Nearly every major American newspaper had a full sports department by 1890 (Betts, 1953), while sports sections at Canadian newspapers had fully emerged by 1914 (Morrow & Wamsley, 2010). The emergence of sports departments in Canada, which began in the early 1890s, was facilitated by the expansion of telegraph technology along Canadian rail lines, which allowed for wire copy to be sent across the country (Morrow & Wamsley, 2010).⁷

With Canadian newspapers fully embracing the importance of sports coverage through the establishment of sports departments, and with the technology of the telegraph and a national wire service, all the pieces were in place for what historians both north and south of the border have coined the golden age of newspaper sports journalism (McChesney, 1989; Morrow & Wamsley, 2010). While fact-filled stories had dominated early sports coverage, the 1920s epitomized the romanticization of sport by newspapers and journalists. In the United States, sportswriters like Grantland Rice and Paul Gallico turned sports figures into larger than life characters, writing stories with flare and interest (McChesney, 1989). These journalists created a narrative that captured the imagination of readers; a reminder that sports stories do not “simply reflect what happens; rather, [they construct] possibilities for what can happen, generating and interpreting sporting moments as significant elements within a meaningful whole” (Kennedy & Hills, 2009, p. 75). As Whannel points out, within the traditional

⁷ The Canadian Press was formed as Canada’s national wire service in 1917. This aided greatly in the expansion of newspaper sport content across the country through the utilization of telegraph services (Morrow & Wamsley, 2010).

sports story, sports figures play a starring role as “characters within a set of narratives” (1992, p. 121). Within the Canadian context, two sports columnists emerged as the kings of Canadian sport coverage: Lou Marsh of the *Toronto Star* and Ted Reeve of the rival *Toronto Telegram*, as the pair took sports writing into a new era in Canada by evolving their coverage beyond facts and into analysis and opinion (Morrow & Wamsley, 2010). Also of note, several key Canadian women emerged in the sports pages alongside the likes of Marsh and Reeve. Female sportswriters such as Phyllis Griffiths, Alexandrine Gibb, and Bobby Rosenfeld were prominent during the period, advocating for women in domains – both athletics and journalism – that were widely viewed at the time to be reserved for men (Morrow & Wamsley, 2010). Collectively, both American and Canadian sportswriters became quasi-celebrities of sorts, playing a pivotal role in the emerging media sports cultural complex (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). The growth of major-league sport and the accompanying newspaper coverage served these sportswriters well financially, as they became valuable commodities on the media landscape. For example, just after the Second World War, George McCullagh—owner of the *Toronto Globe and Mail*—bought the *Telegram* for \$3.5 million and quipped: “That was a hell of a lot of money, but it was worth it—just to get Ted Reeve” (Wise & Fisher, 1974, p. 311). With the fortunes of sportswriters directly tied to the value of their content, their coverage was naturally highly promotional in nature. Not only were individual sportswriters working to implicitly help promote major-league sport, but newspaper management also worked to explicitly promote the growth of major-league sport. For example, *Chicago Tribune* sports

editor Arch Ward led the charge in this regard, as the man behind the idea for both baseball and college football's all-star games during the period (McChesney, 1989).

Overall, the 1920s and sports writing's golden era galvanized major-league sport's relationship with the newspaper industry, further strengthening the ties between the two. As sport historian Benjamin Rader explained, "nothing before or since—not even the cool waves of television—created quite the same hot romance between sport and the public as newspapers in the 1920s" (Rader, 1983, p. 199). After the end of the golden era, the relationship between newspapers and major-league sport remained strong. The emergence of new technologies—radio and television—did not erode the important relationship between newspapers and major-league sport, or the commercial benefits of the relationship for both parties. Sports coverage in newspapers remained in the 12 to 20 per cent range up until 1970—a range that had been established during the golden age in the 1920s. The amount of coverage actually began to grow in the 1970s, thanks to the ongoing popularity of sports, bolstered by television, as well as its inexpensiveness to cover and its noncontroversial nature (McChesney, 1989). Ultimately, the desire of newspapers to secure the male audience commodity created the emergence of sports journalism and the explosion of sports coverage throughout the 20th century, and the relationship between newspapers and major-league sport had a lasting impact on sports journalists working on the ground throughout the golden age and into the late 20th century.

The Institutionalized Work Routines of 20th-Century Sports Journalists

The work routines of early Canadian sports journalists were both remarkably similar to and drastically different from the work routines and labour practices that would emerge in the late 20th century and into the 21st century, as the digital era ascended. Just how much the work routines of contemporary journalists have changed and are changing will be explored throughout this thesis, but the most important commonality between early sports journalists and the generations of journalists that followed is that they were impacted by the relationship between newspapers and major-league sports.

Notably, while the quantity of sports coverage increased in newspapers over the 20th century, the type of sport being covered changed little, as sports journalists were compelled to focus on major-league sport. Major-league sport provided the greatest potential commercial exploitation and, therefore, warranted increasing coverage, as newspapers attempted to grow revenues by selling a valuable audience commodity to advertisers. Therefore, sports with limited potential for commercial gain were relegated to the back pages, if they received coverage at all. These developments, in part, explain the lack of women's sports coverage despite the tremendous growth of female sport during the 20th century (McChesney, 1989). Along with the lack of female sport coverage in newspapers of the 20th century, journalists also underreported on amateur sport, with the exception of nationally-significant events such as the Olympic Games. These two areas of coverage are linked, as the vast majority of female sport over the years has been amateur, with major-league women's sport far outnumbered by major-

league male sport. A number of studies have highlighted the heavy male and major-league sport bias in Canadian newspapers. As cited in Lowes (1999), Joe Scanlon's three-month study of 30 Canadian daily newspapers in 1970 revealed that 86.9 per cent of content could be classified as male, while only 5.5 per cent was labeled female (Lowes, 1999). Not surprisingly, 65 per cent of the content was focused on major-league sport. Following along the same lines as Scanlon's findings, Gelinas and Theberge undertook a content analysis study of the *Toronto Star* and *La Presse* in 1986, finding that both newspapers covered professional sport extensively, but had limited coverage of recreational sport (Gelinas & Theberge, 1986). Several other studies have also highlighted newspaper's overwhelming focus on male major-league sport while neglecting women's sport coverage (Coakley, 1986; Bryant, 1980; Gardener, 1995). Even when the media has covered women in sport, the focus is typically on the appearance and perceived femininity of the athletes, and not on their athleticism. In the case of the celebrated Edmonton Grads women's basketball team in the 1920s and 1930s, the press "judged women first by beauty, then by character and deportment, and last by performance" (Morrow & Wamsley, 2010, p. 183). This continued throughout the 20th century, and women in sport were encouraged to participate in sports that were suitably female, such as figure skating, synchronized swimming, or tennis. Indeed, coverage of Barbara Ann Scott's figure skating success after the Second World War was used as "the media's vehicle for a re-entrenchment (or new wave) of traditionalism that encouraged female domesticity at the expense of competitive involvement" (Morrow & Wamsley, 2010, p. 132). Ultimately, the

clear male major-league sports bias of Canadian daily newspapers is rooted in commercial interests and ideological beliefs. While women's participation in sport is growing, women in sport have always been perceived as inferior to men. As Morrow and Wamsley note, the values that dominate in the Canadian professional sport landscape "privilege men and tend to subordinate women" and the effects of this have been evident in the male-dominant media coverage (2010, p. 277). Newspapers have built a large part of their business with the aim of attracting a male audience and major-league sport has proved the most effective tool in securing this lucrative segment of the population. Thus, sports journalists were restricted in their coverage of certain areas, and compelled to focus on the major leagues.

Major-league sport also had a massive impact on the ebbs and flows of the daily work routines of sports journalists. Much like today, the topics of early newspaper sports coverage revolved around rumours, player movement and fact-filled game reports focused on describing the action for those who could not attend. As Morrow and Wamsley point out in their book *Sport in Canada*, major-league sport organizations served to fuel their fans through the press long before the start of the season:

Fans in Toronto (and Canada) became riveted on the game when the first news of major-league baseball was leaked in one small corner of the sports pages in the dead of winter, and reports gradually included rumours of trades, player injuries, and pennant hopes [...growing] into larger articles

on training camps in the southern United States, and then full pages devoted to major-league coverage. (Morrow & Wamsley, 2010, p. 107)

Sports journalists would generally be assigned to a specific beat—covering a certain sport, league, or team. This would become their area of expertise, and they would focus most of their time getting to know the key players and developing relationships that would help them write about their beat. They were to become the experts on their assigned sport or league. The journalists would then travel with teams, working to provide the entertaining and generally light-hearted content that would keep readers continually enticed. While extensive coverage of teams could be costly to newspapers—with costs of travel and accommodations—these expenses were often offset by major-league sport organizations, which were willing to underwrite journalists' expenses to secure coverage (McChesney, 1989). Again, here lies a prime example of the symbiotic and inherently cozy relationship between newspapers, sports journalists and the teams and organizations they were tasked with covering. In addition, fundamental to early sports journalism was the premise that journalists were not writing simply to inform, but also to provide colourful and entertaining prose that described events in a way that would appeal to members of an audience that did not attend the event they were reading about, or were not athletic themselves (McChesney, 1989; Gruneau and Whitson, 1993). As described earlier, Canadian columnists like Marsh and Reeve—and their counterparts in the United States—began to evolve sportswriting in the 1920s, with an increasing emphasis on opinion and analysis (Morrow & Wamsley, 2010). This was a significant departure from the

sports journalism of the 19th century, and the next major shift in terms of style did not arise until the 1960s and 1970s, with sports telecasting and the expanding role of television. Television spurred significant changes to newspaper sport coverage, with journalists now expected to integrate increased analysis, background information, statistics and quotes into their stories (McChesney, 1989).

Newspapers were in a unique position to integrate all of the elements mentioned above into their coverage, as the medium allowed for simple and seamless integration.⁸ The growing role of quotes had a significant impact on sports journalists; as stories came to rely on quotes, a relationship with major-league sport and access to quotes became even more important. Journalist's reliance on quotes and, hence, sources, for sports coverage become accepted practice and has contributed to one of the chief criticisms of the profession:

[R]eporters began to center their game stories on quotes from players and coaches; the postgame trip to the locker room became standard operating procedure for the sportswriter. At its worst, this approach has produced a mindless formulated genre of reporting that essentially entails the stringing together of a series of cliché-ridden and superficial quotations.

(McChesney, 1989, p. 231)

⁸ The importance of the statistics pages is worth noting. Much like the classified section served as the unquestioned home of classified ads pre-Internet, the sports section served the same purpose for sports statistics. TV and radio provided many of the same stats, but their availability was momentary, whereas newspapers sports stats could be accessed on demand. Anecdotally, many older subscribers began to complain during my time at the *Journal* regarding the shrinking scope of the stats pages, to which the sports editor would remark, "Why would we waste space on stats when they can find every statistic online?"

A heavy reliance on quotes for stories remains a hallmark of traditional newspaper journalism to this day and the reliance on quotes, as well as the close relationship with major-league sport, has been a major criticism of sports journalism, which has often been painted as less serious and less important than the work of traditional journalists.

The Sport Section's Position Within the Fourth Estate

Journalism's role as an important part of society through its ability to generate public discussion, uncover wrongdoing, and provoke thought has become an important part of the concept of the fourth estate (Hampton, 2010). Whether or not sport journalism fits into journalism's wider role within the fourth estate is at times a contentious issue for some. In the hierarchy of the daily newspaper, the sports section has often been viewed as nothing more than a set of pages reserved for the trivial trials and tribulations of athletically-inclined celebrities for promotional purposes. As Raymond Boyle points out in *Sports Journalism:*

Context and Issues:

[W]hat becomes increasingly clear from the research carried out in the print media, particularly in the UK, is that for many scholars sports coverage and sports journalism are not really viewed as part of what journalism (and certainly *serious* journalism) is really about. (2006, p. 12)

Noted sociologist Rowe has also been highly critical of sports journalism and its position as the "toy department" of the news media, with the sports pages focused on fun and frivolity, rather than being a serious part of the fourth estate (Rowe,

2007, p. 385). Indeed, the emergence of sport as a central part of the North American newspaper industry was a divergence from the hard-hitting news that is often associated with the fourth estate role of the press. According to McChesney, part of the allure of sports for daily newspapers was its perceived role as ideologically safe, offering instead “the spirit and excitement of conflict and struggle in a politically trivial area” (1989, p. 221).

In addition, as Conboy and Steel note, “the majority of newspapers have, in their appeal to audience, been responding to the primary imperative in a capitalist era of production” (2008, p. 653). This is true of the entire industry, but has had a greater impact on sports journalists because of their relationship with those they cover. As described previously, newspaper and major-league sport have developed a mutually beneficial relationship over the years. As such, Trujillo and Ekdorn explain that “sports journalists write stories that are aligned with organizational needs; therefore it is rare for a sports journalist to write a story that makes value judgments of any kind that could potentially impact circulation and in turn the bottom line” (1985, p. 264). For Rowe and other critics, this relationship has hindered the rise of sports journalism:

But in the case of sports journalism, an unprecedented opportunity to diversify and deepen its remit occasioned by its expansion and heightened cultural resonance is seemingly being squandered by an excessively close integration with the sports industry, a lack of critical ambition, and an unimaginative reliance on socially and politically de-contextualized

preview, description, and retrospection regarding sports events. (2007, p. 400)

Rowe's criticism of sports journalism is fair in several respects, as stories produced for the sports section remain largely based on sporting events that are rarely situated within the context (social or political, for example) in which they occur. In a similar vein, Goldlust has argued that most sports journalism "has been fairly mundane and descriptive with a heavy emphasis on results, individual performances and records. More importantly, rarely have newspaper journalists been critical of sport as a social institution" (1988, p. 71-72). For a sports journalist on a particular beat, it can be difficult at times not to identify with their routine sources, given the large amount of time they spend together (Lowes, 1999). The lack of critical work by sports journalists has also owed largely to the need for access, which in many cases is perceived to hinge on the sports team's relationship with the individual journalist. Though digitization is eroding the traditional relationship between journalists and sport organizations, and fundamentally altering the broader relationship between major-league sport and daily newspapers, arguments such as those forwarded by Rowe and Goldlust may be becoming even more salient. In many cases, the close relationship between sports journalists and the organizations they cover no longer exists, as sports franchises rely less on media outlets to spread their desired message, opting instead to directly communicate their message through team websites and other tightly controlled avenues of dissemination. The recent ability of teams to utilize their own means of communication to provide information to fans, who are also

the very same audience newspapers are seeking to sell to advertisers, has led to a fundamental shift in the historical relationship between major-league sport and the press, as sports franchises are no longer dependent on the media for publicity. All of these developments have left the media scrambling, and while many journalists are working to provide unique types of content that is not reliant on access, on the whole, the media is still fully dependent on organizations that are increasingly cutting them out. As such, sport journalists may be even more reluctant to endanger relationships with teams or leagues by publishing critical coverage. These developments will be further explored throughout this thesis, but this much is clear: as the media is increasingly by-passed by sport organizations, their reluctance to criticize teams and leagues is growing.

Losing the Commodity: Media and Sport in the Digital Era

The relationship that has existed between major-league sport and newspapers as they simultaneously worked to promote athletic entertainment among readers and fans has had lasting ramifications. Not only did the captive audience lead to a new business model for newspapers, dependent on advertising, but a desire to satiate the needs of that audience led to changes in content, newspaper structure, and the work practices of sports journalists. However, in recent years, it has become more difficult to secure the audience commodity that newspapers have come to depend on. Collectively, the trends of convergence, concentration and digitization have significantly impacted newspapers' abilities to capture the male audience commodity. Most notably, digitization has led to major shifts in the newspaper

industry. Digitization refers simply to the ability of newspaper companies to share content digitally, as opposed to the traditional means of print newspapers. As Nicholas Negroponte put it, digitization is simply transforming “atoms into bytes,” or the physical into the digital (Negroponte, 1995, p. 54). Increasingly, readers are turning away from physical newspapers for their news and entertainment, and instead are using digital means to access information. Thanks to the rise of the internet, people (especially a younger generation of readers) can easily access information online from a variety of sources. For sports fans, they can get news about their favourite team directly from the team website or social media pages that are continually updated, including Twitter. For newspapers, this has meant decades of declining circulation numbers with the accompanying rise of digital media, as less than 40 per cent of Canadian households in 2005 had a newspaper subscription, compared to more than 100 per cent in 1950 before the rise of digitization (Goldstein, 2011, p. 6).⁹ As we shall see, in the case of Postmedia, print circulation revenues—those derived from print sales—have dipped from \$234 million in 2011 to \$195.9 million in 2013 (Postmedia, 2011; Postmedia, 2013). These declines in circulation have been accompanied by losses in print-derived advertising revenues, as advertisers have turned away from the print product and its decreasing audience to the tune of a \$229 million decline between 2011 and 2013, in the case of Postmedia (Postmedia, 2011; Postmedia,

⁹ Goldstein’s study looked at household penetration; in 1950 more newspapers were sold every day in Canada than there were households in the country, whereas in 2005, there were fewer newspapers being sold daily than number of national households.

2013). These changes, set into motion by digitization, have led to two more significant trends in the media industry: concentration and convergence.

Convergence as an economic strategy for media companies in Canada is becoming increasingly popular. Many media companies now publish information online, in print, on television, and on the radio. The importance of multi-platform coverage and cross-platform marketing has become closely tied to the trend of concentration, particularly in Canada. Concentration refers to the increasing trend of cross-media mergers, with different forms of media being increasingly controlled as part of much larger corporations. This pattern is closely tied to the hyper-commercialism of journalism, as media companies of increasing size have pursued business plans aimed at maximizing their advertising revenue stream (McChesney, 2004). Together, the trends of digitization, convergence and concentration have greatly altered the advertising playing field for all forms of media. Canadian sports broadcasters have epitomized both trends, as large media companies have worked to cross-promote their various platforms, while publishing centrally across their platforms,:

[N]ew patterns of cross-media ownership that began in the mid-1980s, during what we now see as the first phase of a longer process of media concentration, were making it more desirable for companies to distribute content across those various channels rather than within a single media platform. Digitization set the conditions for convergence; corporate conglomerates created its imperative. (Jenkins, 2006, p. 11)

A prime example of the results of convergence, concentration and digitization is the sports media company Sportsnet, owned by telecommunications giant Rogers. Sportsnet features four regional television stations, along with multiple specialty stations, two all-sports radio stations, an extensive website, applications and an all-sport magazine launched in 2011, which aimed to solidify the “Sportsnet brand as one of Canada’s leaders in delivering sports content on multiple platforms” (Sportsnet, 2011). Sportsnet has pursued a plan focused extensively on cross-promotion, where journalists now serve as multi-platform content producers and there is little distinction between reporter and broadcaster.¹⁰ Ultimately, Sportsnet serves one main purpose: Rogers Media wants to capture a distinct affluent, male audience commodity, which is “more likely to be male, aged 25-54, with a household income over \$100,000, married and in a management role” (Rogers Media, 2014). Newspapers have lost the commodity, and media conglomerates such as Rogers hope to capture it. Rogers Media, through Sportsnet, attempts to accomplish this goal by providing content that has been proven to attract the male audience, mainly through extensive major-league sports coverage, as highlighted by their 12-year, \$5.2-billion deal to be the Canadian television home of the National Hockey League through the 2025-26 season, which set a Canadian record both in terms of length and price for television rights (Ladurantye, 2013).

¹⁰ Examples of this from Sportsnet’s coverage are numerous. For example, former *Edmonton Journal* and *National Post* employee Mark Spector is a senior columnist for Sportsnet. His written work is featured online and in print, but he is also a regular contributor on Sportsnet’s National Hockey League television broadcasts and appears on Roger Media’s two all-sports stations.

While deals like Sportsnet are significant in terms of their overall impact on the media industry, what often gets forgotten is how these deals have reshaped the day-to-day work routines of sports journalists. The role of journalists, who work for outlets like Sportsnet as multi-platform content producers, contrasts greatly with the past work routines of single-medium journalists, such as newspapers sports journalists (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). New sports journalists are working tirelessly to produce as much content as possible for as many platforms as possible. Their companies then use their multi-platform reach as a major selling point to advertisers.¹¹ In addition to media companies pursuing business strategies focused on multi-platform content production, which has been facilitated by the rapid growth of digital platforms, they are also in a business environment that is dominated by a 24-hour news cycle and tight access controls imposed by sport teams and rights holders (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Rights holders have played a key role in the production of sports content since they entered the media landscape, first with radio and later with television, who worked hard to control “footage used by third parties in order to protect their costly investments in exclusively controlled intellectual property” (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 127). The trends of convergence, concentration and digitization have been game changers for the newspaper industry, their journalists and the relationship between newspapers and major-league sport. Gone are the days of newspapers being the only method for major-league sports to spread their

¹¹ Rogers Media’s slogan, for instance, is “multiplatform media solutions,” highlighting the company’s ability to provide advertisers value across their various platforms.

message to the masses—as was the case in the golden era of sports journalism—or the days when major-league sport counted on the mass media for coverage. Instead, the new reality for sports journalists, especially those in the newspaper industry, is that they are no longer the preferred ‘method’ for spreading major-league sport’s messages. Now, more than ever, it is rights holders like Sportsnet and even more importantly, the teams themselves who spread their message and engage with fans through the power of digitization.

In addition to the fundamentally shifting relationship with major-league sport, are the day-to-day changes with respect to being a journalist in a 21st century newsroom – the institutionalized work routines. A day in the life of Grantland Rice, or Lou Marsh would look very different than that of any journalist today in any number of ways. Gone are print deadlines serving as the primary daily benchmark for journalists like Rice and Marsh, with journalists now expected to be able to file copy at a moments notice. Not having a print deadline for journalists to centre their entire working day around is a reality that would have been unthinkable for journalists pre-digitization, who had the luxury in many ways of working towards a tangible finish line each day, after which their work would be complete, because unlike today, once the paper hit the printing press there was nothing left to do. That is no longer the case for sports journalists, who are now truly 24/7 content providers, expected to react at any moment to breaking news and produce copy for any number of platforms – with print being of no relevance in the breaking news world, which is now entirely digital. All of these developments have contributed significantly to what James Curran coined as

creative cannibalization, which refers to “the mutual lifting of stories from rivals’ websites, as a way of increasing output (2011, p. 116).” As Hutchins and Rowe note, creative cannibalization is increasingly “a structural feature of the contemporary news media in general (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 141).” In the case of Postmedia the practice of creative cannibalization is epitomized by *The Cult of Hockey*, which leans heavily on other outlets – and the *Journal*’s own staff writers – for its stories, as will be discussed in coming chapters.

While the working realities for sports journalists have changed significantly since the days when print was the only platform, one thing remains the goal of all sports sections – securing the ever-important male audience commodity. As the following chapters will show, securing the male audience commodity is increasingly challenging for newspapers, who have seen their relationship with major-league sport begin to erode, all while their business model is collapsing. Collectively, convergent sport journalism has not only altered the commercial landscape of sports coverage for media companies, but it has also fundamentally altered the work routines and labour practices for the journalists on the ground, as this thesis will explore, who have been forced to negotiate these large-scale changes within their day-to-day jobs.

Theory: Cultural Economy and Production in the Media Sport Cultural Complex

With respect to theory, a cultural-economic theoretical framework was employed to examine the changes to the work routines and labour practices of Postmedia

sports journalists. A cultural-economic approach has been successfully utilized in previous case studies relating to the production (and consumption) of sport information in the digital era, as was the case in Scherer and Jackson's study of Allblacks.com, the online home of the New Zealand Rugby Union. The authors used a cultural-economic framework "to illuminate the institutionalized codes of production and work routines of the rugby union's cultural intermediaries" through detailed interviews with those responsible for the production of Allblacks.com (Scherer & Jackson, 2008, p. 187). As the authors point out, the study of cultural intermediaries is important "given their potential global impact on cultural life, including the production and consumption of sport" (Scherer & Jackson, 2008, p. 188). The concept of the cultural intermediary was first developed by Pierre Bourdieu, who used the term to describe "those sets of occupations and workers involved in the production and circulation of symbolic goods and services in the context of an expanding cultural economy in postwar Western societies" (Adkins, 2011, p. 389). By examining the cultural and economic realities that frame the work routines and labour practices of sports journalists, a better understanding of what leads to the production of sports news was gained.

As pointed out by Hall, et al. in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, "[n]ews is the end-product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories" (Hall, et al., 1980, p. 53). While the material, economic realities of Postmedia are an important part of the study, the

central aim was to explore how sports journalists themselves have understood and negotiated those changes and, in turn, how this has impacted what they produce, along with how their relationship with major-league sport has been fundamentally altered as a result of changes to the industry. These are economic and cultural dynamics that need to be explored. On this note, Margaret MacNeill's ethnographic case study on the Canadian Television Network's production of the 1988 Winter Olympic hockey tournament explored how the site of production is one "of struggle, resistance, and accommodation" and through an exploration of this production "a window into the social lives and cultural struggles" of those engaged in the production can be gained (1996, p. 122). Studying the production of Postmedia sports sections through the eyes of journalists serves to further contribute to the work of others like Scherer and Jackson, along with MacNeill by further emphasizing how sport is produced in a calculated way according to various economic and cultural interests that align to form the media sports cultural complex. As Scherer and Jackson note (2008), studying the site of production is key to understanding both the objective, or economic realities, for journalists in a digital, as well as the subjective realities that constrain the day-to-day work routines of sports journalists on the ground. By studying the changing institutionalized work routines and labour practices of Postmedia sports journalists, a greater understanding of the subjective realities for sports journalists was gained, while at the same time acknowledging their position within the objective economic realities of the newspaper industry.

Overall, the value of investigating changes to sports journalists through a cultural-economic framework is of great value, as “processes of production are themselves cultural phenomena in the way that they are assemblages of meaningful practices that construct certain ways for people to conceive of and conduct themselves in an organizational context” (Du Gay, 1997, p. 4). Thus, my research sought to critically examine the work routines and labour practices of Postmedia sports journalists with an understanding that as cultural intermediaries, their work is “central to contemporary economic and cultural life” (Scherer & Jackson, 2008, p. 189).

Methods

Using a qualitative approach, this study sought to understand the role convergence, concentration and digitization have played in reshaping the work routines and labour practices of sports journalists, using the case of Postmedia. This study also provides in-depth information relating to: the history of sports journalism and how the political-economic landscape of the newspaper industry in Canada has changed since the rise of digitization; how Postmedia sports journalists have negotiated the new sets of limits and pressures that have accompanied convergence, concentration, and digitization; and finally, how the roles of Postmedia sports journalists have changed since the rise of team-produced digital content, made possible due to digitization.

A qualitative approach was utilized for a variety of reasons, one of which was the approach’s ability to capture and understand an ongoing, unfolding issue.

As Maria Mayan points out, qualitative researchers “must use creativity, sensitivity, and flexibility as we try to make sense of life *as it unfolds* [emphasis added]” (Mayan, 2009, p. 11). While plenty has been written, especially in the press itself, about the decline of the newspaper industry, gaining a better understanding of how that decline has been negotiated by sports journalists required flexibility, as the newspaper industry continues to change before the eyes of millions of Canadian readers. In addition, like other qualitative research, this case study of Postmedia sports journalists sought to understand the social phenomena of news production “from the perspectives of those involved [and] to contextualize issues in their particular socio-cultural-political milieu” (Glesne, 2006, p. 4). Further, a qualitative approach was most suitable given the complexities of life as a sports journalist within an industry that is experiencing changes that are difficult to reduce to simple cause and effect. Instead, these changes have been the result of multiple trends (convergence, concentration and digitization), all of which bring their own complexities and resulting material impacts to sports journalists on the ground. Therefore a qualitative approach to better understanding these phenomena was best suited for this research, as the aim of any good qualitative research is “not to limit a phenomenon—make it neat, tidy and comfortable—but to break it open, unfasten, or interrupt it so that a description of the phenomenon, in all of its contradictions, messiness and depth is (re)presented” (Mayan, 2009, p. 11). This was precisely the aim of this study, as limited research has addressed the impacts of industry change at the level of the journalist, and more specifically sports journalists, who have negotiated a

fundamental shift in their historical relationship with the sport organizations they cover. By uncovering the impact of an industry's decline at the human level, this research brought to light the changes in the relationship between sports journalists and major-league sport, which have emerged due to convergence, concentration and digitization.

A Cultural-Economic Case Study Approach

A case study approach was utilized for this research for a variety of reasons, but most notably because this approach allowed for the understanding of nuances and more latent elements that other approaches may overlook (Berg, 2009). Case studies have been defined in a variety of ways, but overall the approach is one that is:

Capable of examining simple, or complex phenomenon, with units of analysis varying from single individuals to large corporations and businesses; it entails using a variety of lines of action in its data-gathering segments and can meaningfully make use of and contribute to the application of theory. (Berg 2009, p. 318)

The ability to uncover elements that are not easily identified is an important strength of a case study approach, as the general themes of the newspaper industry's decline are well-known, but more nuanced understandings only became evident through an in-depth evaluation of one industry player, albeit a large and diverse one—Postmedia.

While all case studies hold certain similarities, as outlined by the definition previously mentioned, Stake (2005) identifies three main types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. An intrinsic case study is generally undertaken if “one wants better understanding of this particular case,” whereas an instrumental case is one that “represents other cases or [...] a particular trait or problem” (Stake, 2005, p. 445). This study of how Postmedia sports journalists have negotiated new work routines and labour practices as a result of convergence, concentration and digitization is an instrumental case study. The themes developed throughout this thesis have relevance across the entire Canadian newspaper industry and therefore, the insights gained from Postmedia sports journalists are highly representative of other cases within the Canadian newspaper context. As Stake explains, an instrumental case study is used if “a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” (Stake, 2005, p. 445). Stake also points out that, “[t]he case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else” (Stake, 2005, p. 445). This holds true in this study of Postmedia, as the case itself is not as important as its ability to help understand broader themes.

Data Collection: Document Analysis and Interviews

Both document analysis and semi-structured interviews were utilized in order to answer the research question and accompanying sub-questions. Document analysis was used in answering the first sub-question relating to how the political-

economic landscape of the newspaper industry in Canada has changed since the rise of digitization. This was accomplished through the analysis of Postmedia financial reports and annual reports, which not only provided company financials, but also public remarks from upper management outlining the overarching goals and initiatives the company is planning to undertake moving forward. While these reports were not able to uncover trends predating the creation of Postmedia in 2010, they nonetheless provided valuable data relating to how the company has fared over the last several fiscal years. Along with analysis of Postmedia documents, third-party industry data on circulation and ownership from the Canadian Newspaper Association was utilized. This data provided information on Postmedia circulation trends and market share.

Supplementing the document analysis is data from semi-structured interviews with 14 different sports journalists from across Canada, all employed by the Postmedia chain. For the purpose of this study, a sample size of 14 participants was enough to reach saturation and allow the researcher to obtain reliable data. In order to participate, candidates had to be sports journalists working for Postmedia, since this chain was the target of the case study. Potential participants included both reporters and columnists, as both have similar job descriptions (content providers) and have been impacted in similar ways by the trends of convergence, concentration, and digitization. A list of all potential participants at the time the research process began is attached in Appendix A, which lists all of Postmedia's daily newspapers along with circulation data, as well as the reporters and columnists that were employed by each newspaper. All

of these individuals were potential participants, although an emphasis was placed on securing as many veteran journalists as possible. Journalists who had more than a decade of experience were targeted for interviewing, as these individuals have lived through the emergence of a convergent, concentrated, and digitized newspaper industry in Canada. However, some younger journalists were also included in the sample, as their experiences shed light on how rapidly the industry has changed in recent years. Participants were specifically selected to include variety in the sample. Participants proved to be relatively accessible, as many were familiar with the researcher, and snowball sampling was utilized, with participants recommending colleagues to the researcher. A total of 14 participants were interviewed from eight different Postmedia newspapers. Of the 14 sports journalists interviewed, 12 were men, while two were women.¹² Given the geographic realities of Postmedia, interviews were conducted in person and over the phone, with both the location and time of interviews consented to by the participant prior to the interview. All interviews with staff sport journalists from the *Edmonton Journal* were done in person at a location of the participant's choosing, with all other interviews conducted over the phone.

For the interviews, an interview guide was used to provide a starting point and direct questioning (Appendix B). This guide was created by referring to prior studies within the field, as well as based on the researcher's background knowledge. The questions were pre-tested by soliciting the feedback of the

¹² Despite the fact that only two women were interviewed for this study, the number is in fact very high given at the time research was conducted, the chain only featured three female staff sport journalists.

researcher's supervisor, who has experience in interviewing. Further, the interview guide was refined as the study proceeded, based on the answers and reactions of the initial participants. A semi-structured approach was utilized given the flexibility this format allowed, with questions centered around general themes, with the line of questioning evolving depending on participant reactions (Amis, 2005). This allowed participants to lead the researcher into new areas and to cover areas that may not have been originally addressed in the interview guide. Second, the flexibility of the semi-structured format added to the comfort of participants. The researcher's insider background helped establish a level of trust and rapport between the researcher and participants, and the flexible format allowed participants to lead the direction of the interview, creating a comfortable environment where participants could be open and honest.

In order to ensure the credibility of data, member checking was completed with participants in order to ensure they felt accurately represented. Dependability was achieved through paying particular attention to detail throughout the research process. Multiple tools for data collection were utilized, including audiotaping of all interviews, transcribing of interviews, and thorough note-taking. All sources were checked at the transcription phase to ensure the accuracy of data transfer.

An important consideration during the entirety of the interview process was ethics, as concerns relating to ethics are not simply dealt with through consent from the ethics board (Seidman, 2013). This research was reviewed and approved by the ethics review board. All participants signed consent forms (Appendix C), which were either signed in person or verbally affirmed for

interviews done over distance. The purpose of the informed consent form was two-fold: it provided participants with some background information pertaining to the research, as well as explained in clear terms assurances for the participants, as outlined by the second edition of the Tri-Council Policy Statement on ethical conduct for research involving humans (Tri-Council, 2010). Another important area for ethical concern during research was anonymity. This refers to “concealing the identity of the participants in all documents resulting from the research, therefore actively protecting the identity of the research participant” (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 117). For this research, anonymity was particularly important, as participants were individuals who at the time were employed by Postmedia. Guaranteeing anonymity allowed these individuals to freely discuss their employer without the fear of any potential discipline should their comments be deemed derogatory towards Postmedia. Any identifiers of participants were eliminated to the best of the researcher’s ability. Throughout the interview process, participants went into detail describing experiences, which could have been linked back to the participant without their name being mentioned. Anonymity was preserved using the researcher’s discretion when selecting quotes to include in the data set. Anonymity was addressed prior to all interviews in order to avoid the overall research being impacted. An exception to the anonymization of participants was arranged with David Staples, Jonathan Willis and Bruce McCurdy of The Cult of Hockey. The Cult of Hockey is a hockey blog run by the *Edmonton Journal*, and staffed by Staples, the newspaper’s city hall columnist, and freelancers Willis and McCurdy. Given the unique structure of

The Cult of Hockey, it would have been extremely difficult to discuss the blog in any detail without revealing the identity of the trio. As the only blog across the Postmedia chain with this specific staff structure and subject matter—the Edmonton Oilers—and a unique aim of providing fan-based analytical content, it was important to use specifics to generate rich data. In order to safeguard against the publication of any information that may have been viewed as potentially damaging by the participants, all three were provided with the transcripts of their interviews and allowed to highlight any areas they wished to be excluded from the research. This was deemed acceptable by the researcher, as a means to protect the participants, while still allowing for a large and rich discussion of the blog. All interviews conducted throughout the course of the research were done so at a time and location mutually agreed upon by the participant and researcher. All interviews were recorded and then digitally stored on a memory device in a secure location, which was only accessible by both the supervisor and researcher. Identifying information was removed from the data and is known only to the researcher.

Another ethics issue of consideration was potential bias, given my professional background as a journalist who worked at the *Edmonton Journal*. Acknowledging this reality from the beginning of the research process was important, and I actively sought to ensure that my own background knowledge did not overshadow the participant's responses and the results of the interviews. My background as a sport journalist could be viewed to have had both positive and negative impacts throughout the course of this study. A potential negative

resulting from my background was my inherent empathy for journalists' frustrations with management and changes to their job descriptions; however, I do not believe this bias ultimately impacted the findings of this research, as my research is focused only in part on the financial misfortune of Postmedia, and more importantly on the fundamental changes to the work routines and labour practices of sports journalists and their position within the media sport cultural complex. While my background as a sports journalist in some way can be viewed as a negative, the positives of this reality far outweighed the negatives, specifically relating to the access granted to me. My close personal relationship with several of the interview subjects not only yielded rich data from their interviews, but also served to open access to other journalists I did not have a personal relationship with. Thanks to several journalists serving as gatekeepers to others, I was afforded the luxury of having someone vouch for my intentions, which yielded valuable and largely unfiltered access from journalists across the country. I believe the quality of the accompanying data serves to show that undoubtedly my own experiences and background as a sports journalist served to enrich the research, by helping to provide analysis that is strengthened and not tainted by my previous experience in the field.

Data Analysis: Content Analysis

For the purpose of this research, content analysis was used to analyze the data provided through participant interviews. Content analysis is "a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an

effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings” (Berg, 2009, p. 303-304). This examination is achieved through the coding of data and the accompanying interpretation of the data produced. This content analysis approach was used to code interview transcripts, where differences and similarities were uncovered among the sports journalists who were interviewed. Content analysis has been highlighted as a valuable analytic tool for its ability to uncover “thematic similarities and differences between narratives provided by a number of people” (Smith & Sparkes, 2005, p. 230).

Through the use of content analysis, the complexities of each participant’s experience were explored and contrasted with their colleagues’ responses in order to gain a better understanding of how each have negotiated the changes to the newspaper industry. This could be achieved through using one of two types of content analysis: manifest, or latent. While manifest content analysis is useful for some research, this “bean counting” approach of tallying how many times specific words or ideas are mentioned is “meaningless to a qualitative researcher as the context of the words is not taken into consideration” (Mayan, 2009, p. 94). With this in mind, a latent content analysis approach was taken to identify, code and categorize primary patterns in the data, looking for meaning within context rather than simply noting the occurrence of a word or theme (Mayan, 2009). Due to its ability to situate participant responses in context, this data analysis tool was best suited for this research, as it sought to find commonalities between Postmedia sports journalists’ experiences with respect to how their work routines and labour practices have been impacted by convergence, concentration and digitization.

The Case of Postmedia: Digitization and its Impact

As previously explored, there are several trends that have resulted in the upheaval of the Canadian newspaper industry, most notably among them digitization, which has led to falling circulation numbers and a decline in advertising revenues. Through an examination of the Postmedia chain, this chapter aims to capture many of the changes journalists have been forced to negotiate as a result of this upheaval, most notably the rise of a 24/7 news cycle, which has been accompanied by decreasing staffing levels and an increased focus on platforms beyond print. These developments have led to greater demands on journalists of all stripes. For the vast majority, the expectation of having to be in touch with their beat 24/7 has been taxing. The combination of being in a perpetual state of readiness and smaller newsrooms has proven extremely difficult and collective job satisfaction has declined. At the same time, the growing demand for digital news is ever-present in Postmedia sport departments, as sports content remains a valuable commodity to Postmedia newspapers, who have focused their day-to-day newsroom operations on providing local news and sports content above all else (Ladurantye, 2012). Specifically relating to sport, Postmedia's financial struggles have also been accompanied by an increasing focus on major-league sport, as evidenced by examples like the *Edmonton Journal's* Cult of Hockey, which will be explored in-depth in the coming chapters. As consumers shift their media habits to the digital world, newspapers are attempting to capture the male

audience commodity through an increased focus on major-league sport coverage online.

Newspapers in the Changing Information Landscape

When it comes to the challenges sports journalists face, many are unique to the beat in a changing landscape of sports coverage, such as the rapid growth of team-generated content and a tightening of access to sources. However, sports journalists, like the rest of the newsroom, have been greatly impacted by broader, industry-wide dynamics as well. First and foremost, the most impactful change to the newspaper industry over the last six decades has been the newspaper's declining position of prominence within the overall media landscape, owing largely to the rise of digitization, which has allowed for the instant dissemination of news via the Internet. Once a household staple in Canada, the newspaper's position as the major medium for news and entertainment delivery has been trending downwards since the middle of the 20th century—a decline that has coincided, not surprisingly, with the growth of new technologies used for the dissemination of information (Goldstein, 2011). These technologies, including radio and television, and later the rise of digital media via the Internet, have accelerated the decline of household newspaper circulation in English Canada from a high of over 100 per cent of Canadian households with newspaper subscriptions in 1950, to less than 40 per cent in 2005 (Goldstein, 2011, p. 6)¹³.

¹³ While these numbers are solely for daily newspapers in English households, the downward trend for newspaper circulation also applies to dailies in French

Digital news sources now outpace all other forms of media as the primary source for news. According to the Pew Research Center's biennial news consumption survey—which has tracked patterns in news consumption for nearly two decades—Americans are increasingly turning to digital sources for their news, with 50 per cent of respondents consuming some form of digital news on a given day, and only 29 per cent turning to a newspaper, putting newspapers behind both television (55 per cent) and radio (33 per cent) (Pew Research Center, 2012). In addition, data shows the waning interest in print products. While 54 per cent of respondents in 2002 reported reading print newspapers regularly, that number has declined significantly over the last decade, falling to only 38 per cent in 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2012). Accompanying the decline in the readership of print newspapers has been a spike in digital readers. According to the Pew survey, “substantial percentages of the regular readers of leading newspapers now read them digitally,” with 55 per cent of regular *New York Times* readers saying they read the paper mostly on a computer or mobile device, and 48 per cent of regular *USA Today* readers saying the same (Pew Research Center, 2012). Overall, the Pew research points squarely to an increase in reader's preference for digital news, whether that be on their computer, or other mobile device.¹⁴ While the research was conducted in the United States, the trends are

households. Circulation numbers for French dailies dropped from a high of over 60 per cent in 1950 to less than 35 per cent in 2005.

¹⁴ Also of note, Pew research has found that other forms of media, like radio and television are not immune to the rise of digital preference among consumers. The survey began in 1991, with 68 per cent of respondents saying they got news from television the day prior. That number had fallen to 55 per cent in 2012. Radio,

applicable across North America, as evidenced by falling newspaper circulation numbers in Canada. Readers are losing interest in print and this had serious impacts on the business model of newspapers, as advertisers begin to abandon newspapers for other media.

The newspaper industry had managed to mask their declining share of the media market because advertisers still found value in the audience they were able to purchase from newspapers. Most notably, this included the classified ad market, which until the advent of the Internet was solely controlled by the newspaper industry. As noted Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the mid-1960s, classified ad revenue was pivotal to the economic health of the newspaper industry: “The classified ads (and stock-market quotations) are the bedrock of the press. Should an alternative source of easy access to such diverse daily information be found, the press will fold” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 207). This quote has proven prophetic in many regards, as online classified sites such as Kijiji have all but destroyed the newspaper-classified market. Ultimately, it has been the retreat of advertisers—both classified and otherwise—that has crippled the Canadian newspaper industry. The industry brought in over \$2.7 billion in print advertising revenue in 2008, before seeing that number drop to \$2.1 billion only four years later (Ladurantaye, 2013). With print advertising revenue expected to plummet to less than \$2 billion by 2017, and online advertising increases outpaced by print losses, the economic struggles for

similarly, has seen a sharp decline from 54 per cent in 1991 to 33 per cent in 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Canada's newspaper industry are trending towards increasingly tough times (Ladurantaye, 2013).

The Canadian Media Landscape

In the midst of tough times, Canadian newspapers have utilized different strategies, including cost-cutting and a push to grow digital advertising revenue, as will be explored later in the chapter. However, on a broader level, the industry has turned towards concentration and convergence over the past several decades as strategies to help increase profits in a changing information landscape.

Concentration and convergence are “two distinct but interrelated processes” (Goyette-Cote et al., 2012, p. 755). Convergence is as a way in which content is published across multiple platforms to increase productivity and marketing (Quinn, 2005). Convergence's perceived business benefits—most notably cost-savings—are maximized in an environment of concentration, or cross-media mergers (Goyette-Cote et al., 2012). Convergence creates an environment for cost-cutting through the emergence of multimedia journalists working in a single newsroom. The media company can eliminate news delivery redundancies (for example, by hiring a single reporter to cover a particular beat across multiple mediums, such as print, online and television). While this allows for journalists to be well-rounded, multi-talented providers of information, research has found that the primary driver of convergence is saving money (Deuze, 2007). This is accomplished through two major means: 1) cutting and amalgamating job

descriptions across previously separate media outlets, and 2) asking journalists to do more work, for more platforms while receiving the same salary (Deuze, 2007).

Both concentration and specifically convergence have been dominant in the Canadian context since the early 1990s, when the business strategy gained popularity among media companies seeking to “leverage the computer revolution that had transformed the newspaper industry starting in the 1970s and promised to revolutionize all communication via the internet” (Edge, 2011, p. 1266-67). In addition, the Canadian news industry—including the newspaper industry—has a long history with respect to increased concentration in terms of ownership. Dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, the Canadian newspaper industry has seen a steady increase in ownership concentration. At the beginning of the 20th century, 138 daily newspapers were owned by 136 separate groups, but by 2012 that number had shrunk to only five owners operating virtually every major news outlet across the country (Goyette-Cote et al., 2012). The shrinking number of media owners can be attributed to federal deregulation, as media owners have successfully pushed for fewer regulations. This trend of federally-endorsed ownership concentration dates back to the 1980s, when a ban on joint newspaper-television ownership was allowed to lapse (Bartley, 1988), and the endorsement of cross-media ownership by the federal government has been strengthened in recent years. Shortly after the Conservatives came to power in 2006, the new government illustrated their unequivocal support for deregulation when then Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women Bev Oda—a former CTV and Canwest executive—stated: “The government recognizes that convergence

has become an essential business strategy for media organizations to stay competitive in a highly competitive and diverse marketplace” (As quoted in Edge, 2011, p. 1268). But despite the belief of the federal government that media organizations need the ability to grow unregulated, this trend has actually worked against companies like Postmedia and their forerunner Canwest, and the growth of media companies has not yielded the positive economic results the industry’s major players had hoped for.

Specifically relating to newspapers, three major players dominate the daily newspaper scene in Canada’s largest cities—Postmedia, Quebecor/Sun Media and Torstar Corp.—operating daily newspapers in at least two major metropolitan markets. In addition, CTV Globemedia Inc. is also a player in the Canadian newspaper industry despite owning just a single paper, the country’s oldest national daily, *The Globe and Mail*. In total, these four owners account for a 75.1 per cent share of average daily circulation in Canada, clearly illustrating the power of only a few major players to dominate the Canadian newspaper scene (Canadian Newspaper Association, 2012). In the case of CTV Globemedia Inc. and Quebecor/Sun Media, their newspaper operations represent only a portion of their annual operations as multiple-platform media conglomerates, with both companies heavily invested in the television sector.

Overall, these corporations view information (no matter the form of presentation) as a commodity, judged by its value on the open market, with the objective of business operations being the production of economies of scale, while at the same time maximizing audience reach in their given market (Goyette-Cote

et al., 2012). These dual goals are achieved in the newspaper industry by “optimizing the use of printing plants, centralizing the production of different titles, [and] streamlining the production and dissemination of information” through a process of “setting up industrial synergies, ensuring profitability for content produced by journalists and their optimal use in various capacities” (Goyette-Cote et al., 2012, p. 754). As Edge points out, this strategy is desirable in order to allow for the sale of advertising—hypothetically at an increased rate—across multiple platforms, while paying only a single journalist to cover the story for multiple mediums (Edge, 2011). Despite the rationale of ownership, the results have not been favourable for many convergent media companies, including Postmedia, as the debt levels these companies have taken on in the process of building their stable of properties through acquisitions has become so high as to become difficult to pay down, particularly during times of economic hardship (Edge, 2011).¹⁵ The inability to cope with debt was the major contributing factor in the demise of Canwest. As Dwayne Winseck points out: “Even Canwest has been profitable, sometimes extremely so, every year since 1991 in terms of operating profits and all but two years (2004 and 2008) in terms of return on equity [...] How is it possible for highly profitable firms to be in such disarray? The answer is debt” (Winseck, 2010, p. 382). Canwest and Postmedia have not been alone in their struggles with debt, as the media industry as whole continues to struggle with the issue and, “while the cost to specific firms has been high, the

¹⁵ The issue of debt repayment has become an increasingly pressing matter for Postmedia, as evidenced by credit rating agency Moody’s warning about the company’s future in July 2013. The report was issued in the wake of Postmedia’s \$470-million debt load and continued restructuring efforts.

cost to the economy, society, journalism and the network media ecology has been higher” (Winseck, 2010, p. 384). As Winseck alludes to, these ownership changes have had real impacts with respect to how and who society gets its news from, in addition to the very real changes to journalistic practices, including the rise of multimedia newsrooms.

Postmedia: The Face of English Canada’s Failing Newspaper Industry

Born in 2010, Postmedia is “the largest publisher by circulation of paid English-language daily newspapers in Canada, representing some of the country’s oldest and best known media brands” (Postmedia website, 2014). Currently with 10 daily newspapers, Postmedia’s newspaper empire stretches from Vancouver to Montreal, where the *Gazette* serves as that city’s lone English daily. While Postmedia’s brands include some of the oldest newspapers in Canada—the *Gazette* was founded in 1822—Postmedia itself is a relatively young corporate entity. The company came into being less than five years ago, after Canwest Global Communications Corporation sold off its newspaper assets. Canwest itself was a textbook example of media concentration. Canwest was born as a single television station in the 1970s, and emerged as Canada’s third full-programming television network (Global TV) near the same time it entered the newspaper business with the acquisition of Hollinger’s Canadian newspaper assets for \$3.5 billion in 2000 (Hammond, 2000). As is well known, Canwest’s foray into the newspaper industry proved to be a relatively short-lived endeavor, as the venture lasted only a decade before then *National Post* president and current Postmedia

CEO Paul Godfrey spearheaded the purchase of Canwest's newspaper holdings for \$1.1 billion in 2010 (CBC, 2010). The deal beat out a competing offer headed by Torstar Corp., the owner of Toronto's biggest daily *The Toronto Star*, who offered \$925 million for Canwest's newspaper holdings (Flavelle, 2010).

Postmedia's purchase included the proviso that the company maintain all existing newspaper operations, while continuing to provide employment to all existing full-time employees and substantially all part-time employees (Flavelle, 2010).

The promise of stable employee numbers has not been kept since Postmedia began the difficult task of attempting to right the company's financial fortunes.

The Postmedia newspaper chain is comprised of the flagship national newspaper the *National Post*, along with nine dailies - *Montreal Gazette*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *Windsor Star*, *Regina Leader Post*, *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, *Calgary Herald*, *Edmonton Journal*, *Vancouver Sun* and *Vancouver Province*. Only a year after its formation, Postmedia held a 29.5 per cent market share of total paid daily circulation in 2011, making it the only company with an average issue paid daily circulation of more than a million (Canadian Newspaper Association, 2012).

Despite this strong market share, Postmedia has struggled to successfully adapt to changing economic realities such as falling print subscription and advertising revenue. Postmedia's third quarter report for 2013 highlights the company's revenue shortage, as print advertising revenue slipped 16.5 per cent from 2012 to \$94.7 million and digital ad sales dropped 4.3 per cent to \$23.1 million. These losses were accompanied by falling print circulation revenue, which fell slightly to \$49 million (Postmedia, 2014; Dobby, 2014). Postmedia's financial losses have

continued into the fourth quarter, as the company has seen print advertising revenue decreased \$19.8 million, or 21.0 per cent, to \$74.2 million, while digital revenues fell \$1.1 million, or 5.3 per cent to \$20.3 million (Postmedia, 2014).

Under the leadership of Godfrey, Postmedia has attempted drastic restructuring initiatives aimed at cost cutting and adapting to the new media landscape. At the time of Postmedia's emergence, Godfrey identified three key areas for the new company to address heading into its first year post-Canwest: growing digital, in particular "developing a digital first culture" in newsrooms; cutting costs; and repaying debt (Postmedia, 2010). Of particular importance with regards to Postmedia's early objectives was cost-cutting—a goal that has become paramount to virtually every initiative the company has undertaken in its infancy—with plans to cut operating costs by an additional \$120 million by 2016 (Ladurantaye, 2013). The desire to reduce costs, particularly "legacy costs," which are expenses associated with the print production of newspapers, was the focal point of change in the company's first annual report to investors, published after the end of the fiscal year in 2010 (Postmedia, 2010). This goal has been forwarded since 2010 through such strategies as voluntary buyouts and the sale of several newspapers, notably the *Victoria Times-Colonist*. Also notable with regards to cost cutting measures was the centralization of editing and layout operations in Hamilton, Ontario. This move, which meant fewer employees at local newspapers handling editing and page layout, aimed to cut costs through centralization, while not impacting the quality of content produced by journalists (Ladurantye, 2012). Despite Postmedia's hopes for centralization to serve as

purely a cost-cutting measure, the result in the opinion of the majority of sports journalists interviewed is that it has also had the undesired result of cutting quality. This will be developed further in the coming chapters, as sports journalists from across the country have experienced similar levels of frustrations with the centralization of many editing and layout functions in Hamilton.

Postmedia's Plummeting Print Revenues

The North American newspaper industry as a whole has seen print revenue fall rapidly in recent years, with only moderate gains in digital advertising. In the U.S., print advertising revenue has fallen from nearly \$45 billion in 2003 to less than \$19 billion in 2012 (Edmonds et. al, 2013). Accompanying these massive losses in print have been gains in online advertising revenue, but these gains have fallen short of making up for print losses. While online advertising revenue in the U.S. has increased nearly threefold from \$1.2 billion in 2003 to \$3.4 billion in 2012, total advertising revenues for the newspaper industry have fallen from \$46.2 billion in 2003 to \$22.3 billion in 2012 (Edmonds et al., 2013). In the case of Postmedia, print advertising revenues have steadily declined since Postmedia came into being, as this revenue stream has fallen from \$674.5 million in 2011—the company's first full fiscal year—to \$445.5 million in 2013, amounting to a decline of \$229 million over the course of only two years (Postmedia, 2011; Postmedia, 2013). This fall in print advertising has created a challenging financial situation; despite attempts to diversify revenue streams through increased emphasis on digital platforms, Postmedia continues to predominantly rely on print

advertising to generate revenue. In 2011, print advertising revenue for Postmedia accounted for 66.2 per cent of total revenue, and while this percentage has fallen slightly over the past few years, in 2013, print advertising revenue still accounted for 59.3 per cent of all revenue (Postmedia, 2011; Postmedia, 2013). In addition to print advertising revenue declining over the first few years of Postmedia's existence, so too have print circulation revenues, which dipped from \$234 million in 2011—accounting for 23 per cent of total revenue—to \$195.9 million and 26.1 per cent of total revenue in 2013 (Postmedia, 2011; Postmedia, 2013). The decline in print circulation has been a troubling trend in the newspaper industry, as consumers have turned to an unprecedented number of online outlets for their news and entertainment, with fewer individuals purchasing the print edition of newspapers. Simply put, falling print circulation revenues are a clear indication of fewer hardcopies being sold, both in terms of subscriptions and single-copy purchases.

All told, Postmedia has seen its total print-derived revenue (advertising and circulation) fall from \$908.5 million in 2011—89.2 per cent of total revenues—to just \$641.5 million in 2013 (Postmedia, 2011; Postmedia, 2013). These significant declines in print revenue have not been solved by growth in digital revenues, which remain modest in comparison. With such significant losses in revenue from print-derived streams, Postmedia has emphasized the need to grow digital revenue since the company's creation in June 2010. Digital revenue was highlighted as a “future growth opportunity” and focus area in the company's first annual report, as Godfrey sought to institute a digital-first culture

with respect to news delivery and an increased emphasis on aligning print and digital sale groups (Postmedia, 2010). In Postmedia's first full fiscal year, the company saw moderate growth in digital revenues, generating \$90.3 million in sales, compared to \$84.2 million during the 2010 fiscal year (Postmedia, 2010; Postmedia, 2011). Despite this growth, the company's digital revenue growth has stalled, with digital revenues reaching just \$91.6 million in 2013, and losses in print revenue far outpacing any gains in this area (Postmedia, 2013).

Cutting Legacy Costs at All Costs

Postmedia's inability to significantly grow digital revenue streams to keep up with falling print revenues has meant an increased reliance on cost cutting to help the company cope with losses. Chief among the expense areas Postmedia has sought to cut have been compensation. The move to lower the company's compensation costs dates back to Canwest, which cut compensation expenses by six per cent during the 2010 fiscal year. Postmedia highlighted the need to further reduce compensation costs in its 2010 annual report, stating it would be "implementing additional strategies to further reduce compensation expenses" moving forward (Postmedia, 2010, p. 9). Among the first measures taken by Postmedia to cut compensation costs was the consolidation of several classified ad sales centres into a single centre in Calgary, which occurred during the 2010 fiscal year. Classified ad sales have always been an important revenue source for the newspaper industry, with this revenue stream accounting for 19 per cent of print advertising revenue in 2010 (Postmedia, 2010). But like other revenue

streams, classified ad sales have shrunk significantly in recent years, with classified advertising falling nearly 17 per cent during the 2013 fiscal year, as digital classified ad sites, like Kijiji, continue to cut into an area once dominated by newspapers (Postmedia, 2013). The consolidation of classified ad sales into a single centre was only the start of cost cutting in this area. In January 2014, Postmedia announced it would be closing the Calgary call centre, opting instead to outsource its classified ad sales to a U.S. firm, meaning all but a few of the company's 48 classified ad employees were laid off (Dobby, 2014). Predating Postmedia's decision to outsource classified sales was its decision to outsource ad production during the 2010 fiscal year. Citing cost savings and an increased ability to focus on the company's core business, Postmedia sent ad production duties to third party suppliers in both India and the Philippines (Postmedia, 2010). Despite concerns ranging from foreign currency fluctuations, to an inability to successfully integrate third parties into the production process, Postmedia at the time noted the potential to outsource additional functions in the future (Postmedia, 2010).

Both voluntary and involuntary buyouts have become commonplace in the newspaper industry and Postmedia is no different. Buyouts were utilized by Canwest to cut costs prior to Postmedia's formation: Canwest/Postmedia spent \$10.7 million on severance between July 13, 2009 and August 31, 2010 (Postmedia, 2010). Buyouts and their accompanying severance costs have continued at Postmedia into the 2014 fiscal year, with the company having spent \$5.8 million over the year's first three quarters on severance costs (Postmedia,

2014). In addition to cost savings in compensation, Postmedia also sought to cut marketing, travel and freelance budgets beginning in 2010 (Postmedia, 2010). In addition to the cost cutting measures listed above, Postmedia has utilized other means to lower its expenses since 2010. The sale of Lower Mainland Publishing Group, *Victoria Times Colonist* and Vancouver Island Newspaper Group—all of which were part of Canwest’s newspaper holdings—in 2011 for \$86.5 million, along with the outsourcing of printing functions for the *Edmonton Journal* and *Calgary Herald* in 2013 are just two key examples of Postmedia’s continued focus on cost cutting initiatives (Postmedia, 2011; Postmedia, 2013). In addition to these measures, the company also sold its headquarters in Toronto for \$23.2 million in 2012, which went solely towards the repayment of debt—one of the key areas Godfrey and the company had outlined as a priority after taking control in 2010 (Postmedia, 2012).

Digital Dollars: How Postmedia Hopes to Cash in Online

With Postmedia’s print revenue sagging and the company slashing costs to survive within an increasingly diverse digital news environment, one concept has come to define Postmedia’s plan to evolve into a digital-first news provider—the four-platform strategy. Aimed at providing unique content for print and digital via the website and through separate applications for smartphones and tablets, the goal of the four-platform initiative was unveiled publically in 2012 and promised to provide “differentiated products and services by platform,” allowing for “an ‘all-access’ subscription strategy” to be pursued (Postmedia, 2012). The four-

platform strategy was seen as a way to reach all age groups, with the print edition focused at reaching Boomers (48-66), the tablet for Gen X (33-47), the smartphone for Gen Y (18-32) and the website as an all encompassing platform for readers of all ages (Postmedia, 2012). Ultimately the vision for the four-platform strategy was to provide a “fully differentiated and a fully integrated set of target products,” as the company sought to develop into a digital-first operation that could take advantage of each platform’s unique abilities (Postmedia, 2012).

Behind Postmedia’s increasing focus on digital content provision across all four platforms, is its desire to increase digital revenue in the face of falling print revenue. One of the company’s most significant initiatives to date in this area was undertaken in 2012 with the launch of paid online content, or what is commonly referred to as a paywall. Starting with a pilot project at the *Montreal Gazette*, and later expanding to the *Vancouver Sun*, *The Province* and *Ottawa Citizen*, and eventually implemented chain-wide by early 2013, Postmedia has attempted to monetize its digital properties by charging for content that up until recently had been available free of charge. Ultimately, the company hoped this revenue model would help fill the void left by decreasing print sales, as digital news continued to grow.

This model paves the way for enhanced subscription bundles, new revenue streams and greater opportunity for audience engagement. We believe this path will, in time, lead to growing revenue opportunities as the market for digital content expands in response to the increasing popularity of tablets and sophistication of smartphones (Postmedia, 2012, p. 5).

While the long term success of the four-platform strategy—an area that will be explored in the next chapter using the experiences of journalists—remains to be seen, the rationale behind the strategy is clear. In addition to monetizing online content through the sale of digital subscriptions, Postmedia has also sought to monetize all four of its platforms, specifically digital platforms, “by creating frictionless selling of audiences to advertisers targeting lucrative niches but reaching mass when necessary” (Postmedia, 2012, p. 5). The selling of audiences has always been key to newspapers and specifically the sports section. Sports developed into a key coverage area for newspapers due to its ability to generate the male audience commodity. The continued need to provide advertisers with an audience has led the media industry to search for clearly defined groups of readers, listeners, and viewers, which can be sold strategically to advertisers looking to maximize the return on their investment. Digital news delivery has provided newspapers with a wealth of knowledge about their audience that print simply could not, as digital platforms allow newspapers to track and analyze reader interests and habits. Any data relating to readership has potential for newspapers, as they seek to present advertisers with the clearly defined audiences they value.

Despite the potential benefits of digital-based reader data, Postmedia has not been focused primarily on providing value to advertisers and by developing innovative digital strategies to secure the audience commodity. While the company outlined its top priority of becoming a digital-first news organization, this goal has taken a back seat to the more pressing issue of financial survival.

Even the cutting of the Sunday editions at the chain's newspapers in 2012 was motivated by a need to save money, and was not a move indicating a focus on the digital.¹⁶ As Godfrey highlighted in a 2012 interview with *The Globe & Mail*, the company remains committed to providing a print product:

Sunday papers are really not making any money at all in those markets. So we've decided to keep everything every thing online there and do away with print copies to reduce legacy costs... We've discontinued Mondays in the summer at the Post, we're analyzing whether to do that throughout the year or not... I think there is still great demand for the public having a print copy. It's just how do you reduce legacy costs. Are we near the stage of no print paper, I don't believe that (Ladurantye, 2012).

The company's seeming unwillingness to make bold, strategic decisions—like the potential axing of the company's print products all together—has meant only moderate gains in digital revenues, while print revenues continue to shrink.

Whether or not the company re-evaluates its stance on moving away entirely from print to a truly digital-first business plan remains to be seen.

Ultimately, despite its priorities suggesting otherwise, Postmedia remains largely a dinosaur in the digital news world. Held back by the resources they continue to invest in the print product and unwilling to truly step into the digital deep end, the company is in limbo between serving its print readers—who admittedly still represent a large portion of the company's revenue base—and

¹⁶ The *Edmonton Journal*, *Calgary Herald* and *Ottawa Citizen* were the last three Postmedia newspapers to print Sunday editions. Prior to 2012, the year in which the *Journal*, *Herald* and *Citizen* axed their Sunday papers, all other Postmedia newspapers had already discontinued their Sunday editions.

those who get their news solely from digital sources. When asked in 2012 what one would see from Postmedia journalists in Godfrey's new, leaner, digital-first newsrooms, the answer was simple: "Local news. Local Sports" (Ladurantye, 2012). This simplistic answer, however, does not shed much light on what Postmedia journalists are now expected to do with substantially diminished resources, or the specific type of sports that will be covered, but as this research has highlighted, it is local major-league sport that is increasingly the focus of Postmedia and not other, less lucrative local sports, like amateur athletics. While the content journalists are producing in newsrooms across the country is by in large local news and sports, in reality, Postmedia journalists are now expected to do more than they ever have before. With four platforms—print, website, tablet, and smartphone—to populate with content and even fewer staff to do it, the demands put on Postmedia journalists have never been greater. These changing realities at Postmedia newspapers have had a significant impact on journalists in their day-to-day work, and the following chapter will explore how sports journalists in the chain are navigating the upheaval of their industry.

Sports Journalism in the 24/7 News Environment

While the poor state of the Canadian newspaper industry is well-known, what is often not considered is the ways in which these economic pressures impact the journalists on the ground, attempting to do their jobs. Indeed, shrinking newsrooms, coupled with a focus on growing digital, has led to Postmedia journalists that are overworked and less satisfied in their jobs. Beyond that, sports

journalists feel that corporate attempts to keep content quantity at, or near the same levels as those that predated staff cuts and the general decline of the newspaper industry, are undoubtedly going to have an impact on quality. While quality is difficult to measure, several scholars have established means to assess the general quality of newspapers, including Meyer and Kim (2003), who built on the work of Leo Bogart (1989) to develop five factors used to analyze newspaper quality. This chapter will explore the changing work routines of Postmedia sports journalists, through the lens of newspaper quality. I will draw on the work of scholars, but equally as importantly, I will draw on the words of Postmedia sports journalists themselves, who have a uniquely acute sense of the quality of their work. Postmedia sports journalists feel there is a general lack of quality in their sports sections as a result of decreasing staff sizes, and increased emphasis on quantity over quality, and the factors they describe that are leading to this general lack of quality are precisely those explored by scholars. In short, Postmedia sports sections are suffering from a lack of quality content due to: shrinking newsrooms, management perception that Postmedia employees are now relied on as content providers as opposed to journalists, the outsourcing of key behind the scenes jobs like deskers and the narrowing scope of Postmedia sport sections, which increasingly focus on major-league sport.

“It Never, Ever Stops”: The 24/7 News Cycle

Directly tied to decreasing newspaper quality is the industry’s dire financial situation. With the newspaper industry’s two major sources of revenue, paid

subscriptions and advertising, continuing to shrink, so too has the size of newspaper operations across the country.¹⁷ The shrinking of staff, like the decline of circulation numbers, has been a long, drawn out process that has occurred over more than a decade at many Postmedia newspapers. Throughout the course of the research, participants were asked how the size of the sports department compared to when they were first employed with their current newspaper. Participants were unanimous that their sections had been downsized. The number of staff reductions varied from newspaper to newspaper, with papers in smaller markets having seen fewer layoffs, as a result of their smaller staff structures. Still, despite varying degrees of downsizing across the sports departments in the Postmedia chain, each department has had to contend with a shrinking newsroom, and they've done so amid the 24/7 news cycle that has radically expanded the scope of their workday.

Of all the changes to the newspaper industry brought about by digitization, none has had more of an impact than the emergence of the 24/7 news cycle. While reporters have always had to contend with news breaking at any given moment, the expectation of an immediate story has been a challenge unique to the digital age, as online news has eliminated the traditional printing press deadlines that once served as concrete markers in a journalist's day. As one veteran sports journalist pointed out, the days of a single deadline have long since been replaced

¹⁷ Not only are editing and writing jobs being cut by Canadian newspapers, but also behind the scene jobs like classified ad sales people. In January 2014, Postmedia announced that 48 employees in its Calgary classified department would be laid off, with classified responsibilities being outsourced to a New York-based company (CBC, 2014).

by constant deadlines, which are largely tied to news being broken and leaked via social media, most notably Twitter.

Before you had one deadline stress, so whatever the deadline was—if it was 11 p.m.—that was the deadline you dealt with. Now, you have these virtual deadlines [...] you're always checking Twitter, because if someone has something out there that you don't have, you go, 'shoot,' because then you have to start chasing it. It never, ever stops (January 10, 2014).

The loss of a single deadline and the emergence of the 24/7 news cycle has had a significant impact: no longer can a scoop be kept under wraps until a story appears in print form. While print newspaper scoops still occur on occasion, they are increasingly rare, specifically in the world of sports, where Twitter has been embraced for breaking news both by journalists and sport organizations, a trend that will be explored in depth in the next chapter. Twitter's utilization as the means by which stories are broken has been the cause of great frustration for sports journalists, even for those who have embraced the site's ability to disseminate news instantaneously.

Morning paper scoops are rare. It happens sometimes, but they're very, very rare. It's very frustrating if you think you've got something and boom—someone kind of just blows it up like that [with a tweet] (January 14, 2014).

Not only do journalists have to deal with news breaking at any moment, but the “liquidity” of news (Karlsson & Stromback, 2010), or the dynamic nature of news (Pavlik, 2000) is also a new challenge of the digital age. Liquidity

captures the sense in which online news stories have the ability to change over time:

Liquid news starts with a few words and can, although not necessarily, later be complemented with pictures, videos, or hyperlinks to other internal or external stories. It can increase in volume or adjust previous statements without leaving a trace. It facilitates various aspects of user participation that can affect news stories' contexts and contents. Users and content analysts consequently find themselves exposed to different versions of news stories that can differ substantially in terms of their quality, the information available, the modalities used and opportunities for user contributions without the sites upon which these appear informing anyone that these changes have occurred (Karlsson & Stromback, 2010, p. 398).

In an environment of constant and liquid news, journalists are continually updating and revising their stories, all while new developments break, often on social media. This environment of constant, liquid digital news has meant that sports journalists have never been more tied to their beats. While journalists from all sections have been forced to negotiate the pressures of the 24/7 news cycle and the ascendance of Twitter, sports journalists have been particularly impacted, as they are often the sole journalist covering a specific sport, team, or league at their newspaper and are expected to react at a moment's notice if any news involving their beat breaks. These new pressures have, predictably, led to lower job

satisfaction for many sports journalists, as they are no longer able to step away from their labour, even momentarily.

There's no doubt that people's health in this business has been affected by the round-the-clock nature of it. I don't think there's any doubt of it. You can't punch a clock in this job if you want to stay in it. If that's for you, do something else. You have to be aware of the fact that your phone can go off, your Twitter can go off and you have to react even though you're completely clueless about what the topic matter is. People will say, 'what's this guy gonna say about it? Is it true?' I guess that comes with the public trust. That can be onerous (January 27, 2014).

The increasing demands on sports journalists in the digital age have been chronicled by other researchers, including Hutchins and Rowe (2012), who spoke to Australian sports journalists about the radical changes to their work routines. From this research, the pair uncovered what they termed "hyperactive, multi-tasked journalistic routines" (Hutchins & Rowe, p. 140). These routines, which feature the utilization of everything from Twitter to audio and video features for the web, have forced journalists to create quantities of content the likes of which was unheard of in the pre-digital age. It is now commonplace for journalists to produce more than 2,500 words a day, between stories and updates, and this number has increased with the elimination of the sole print deadline (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012).

“Conduits of Information”: Journalists as Content Providers

Within Postmedia, the need to provide increasing levels of content for their various platforms—print, online and applications designed for both smartphones and tablets—has led to the adoption of the term ‘content provider’ in place of the traditional title of journalist. While the term has emerged within the company at a managerial level to describe employees, it has become a frustration for some journalists, who associate the label with what they perceive as a corporate policy of quantity over quality. For one journalist, the label has a highly negative connotation, devaluing their work.

The maddest I’ve ever been was when we were told a couple of years ago that we’re not reporters anymore; we’re content providers. That’s about as big a slap in the face as anything. In other words, ‘here’s the hole.

Whatever you give us is fine.’ Not, ‘go report on this.’ Just, ‘here’s the hole. Fill it up’ (December 10, 2013).

The label of content provider has become synonymous in the minds of sports journalists across the chain with the expectation from management that there is seemingly no end to the amount of content that can be produced in a given day. As one journalist aptly noted, they are now simply part of a “production line” for the various platforms, and their labour is now a continuous circuit of production. In the eyes of journalists, their transformation from journalist to content provider has led to an ever-declining quality within each individual story and collectively the sports section, both in print and digitally. Increasing content quantity expectations are especially true for Postmedia’s NHL journalists, who acknowledge the quality control implications of writing on every possible

‘newsworthy’ tidbit surrounding a team – a key distinction from an earlier era of journalism.

When you’re writing a million little things, it’s going to take away from the quality of the big thing. My volume expectations when I started covering sports to last year [...] I was writing three or four times as much as I used to. That being said, the quality bar was much higher before.

When you’re writing three stories for the paper and two blogs, the quality is going to be different (January 14, 2014).

These sentiments were a common theme, as journalists bemoaned the lack of time allotted within a given day to research, fact-check and work at crafting a story.

For one veteran journalist, who has covered sports over parts of five decades, the inability to collect and work with information for a story has fundamentally impacted his role.

Before we would collect the information, write a story, or submit two, or three stories [...] Now we’re in word processing mode for a greater chunk of the day. We’re much more conduits of information, some of which is made into stories, some of which is just information we’re sending out [...] You have less time in the course of a daily experience to really do the kind of job you really wanted to do in the past, because there’s no time (November 28, 2013).

Ultimately, serving in the production line of content and being judged on the quantity of content they produce, as opposed to the imagination, research, and

overall quality in their work, has led to falling levels of workplace satisfaction for many sports journalists, including this NHL beat journalist.

Now, it's 'get it in as quick as you can.' It's more about quantity than quality. Before, you'd have all day to work on a story. Now that luxury is long gone, so the actual workdays aren't shorter. Between tweets and web hits and online game stories at the buzzer, there's no sense of fulfillment at the end of the day, because you're not really proud of what you produced. (December 10, 2013).

Despite near consensus amongst the journalists interviewed about the negative connotations of being labeled a content provider, one veteran journalist shrugged off the label as nothing more than an accurate description of what journalists have always done—create content for an audience. For him, producing content and being a journalist have gone hand in hand over the decades, and despite changes to the industry, what it means to be a journalist has not been radically altered by recent upheavals in the industry, which he acknowledged as challenging, but not unique to Postmedia.

Just because the industry's changing so much, [the label of content provider] is just one more thing [...] The very name of what you've sought to become has changed [...] to become a content provider. I don't think it's derogatory necessarily. I see it as something sometimes people might say with a bit of a roll of the eye, or tongue in cheek, but journalism is still journalism, no matter what you call it.

[The cuts are] just a fact of the business. Things are changing. I mean, it's all over the place. It's not just here—it's everywhere. I don't know if there's a media company anywhere in North America that hasn't had its issues and I don't mean to make that sound evasive—it's just true. I mean, I married a journalist and [...] my father's a journalist, my uncle was a journalist and I have a whole bunch of journalism friends obviously, and it's just become a fact of life. You know, this thing's changing and companies are going to have to change with it (March 27, 2014).

The reality facing Postmedia sports journalists is not unique to the chain, or Canada for that matter, with quantity versus quality a very real concern at newspapers across North America. While quantity is a straightforward measure of how many articles appear, quality is more difficult to measure. Several different models exist that attempt to measure newspaper quality. John Merrill's *The Elite Press* (1968) ranked newspapers into six categories—primary elite, secondary elite, tertiary elite, near elite, general newspapers and mass papers—based on five quality indicators, including their independence, world consciousness, emphasis on politics and their effort to employ a large, well-educated staff (Merrill, 1968). Several other scholars have looked at newspaper quality over the years (Merrill & Lowenstein, 1971; Gladney, 1990) with many of them focusing on the opinions of newspaper editors themselves. More recent studies of newspaper quality have steered away from indicators based on data collected from industry experts, towards a focus on quality indicators that can be applied to various cases. One such study is Meyer and Kim's 2003 work *Quantifying Newspaper Quality*: "I

know It When I See It”, which narrowed newspaper quality down to five factors: ease of use, localism, editorial vigour, news quantity and interpretation (2003). Through interviews with 285 newspaper editors, Meyer and Kim concluded that diminishing quality will ultimately lead to financial struggle:

Quality journalism, in the minds of some, is more cost than gain. We think that perception is based, in most cases, on an erroneous perception about costs of lowering quality. Bottom-line benefits are immediate, but the cost in diminished reader loyalty and reduced cohort replacement are slower to materialize. The industry urgently needs to find the resources to help newspaper managers position their products more precisely along the profit-service axis. In the absence of such accurate positioning, both their profitability and their social responsibility may be at risk (Meyer & Kim, 2003, p. 9).

Meyer and Kim’s findings could prove prophetic for chains like Postmedia, who are keen to cut costs, oftentimes through measures that will ultimately lower the quality of their product, without a complete understanding of the long-term impact.

Another valuable study that examined newspaper quality was Miles Maguire’s study of Oshkosh, Wisconsin’s local newspaper, the *Northwestern*, which looked at the quality of the newspaper using content analysis through several ownership changes (Maguire, 2004). Not surprisingly, Maguire found the newspaper’s quality in general decline through four different owners:

The *Oshkosh Northwestern* was never a great newspaper. But by several key measures it has gotten demonstrably worse in five years since its family owners sold it to a series of chains. There are fewer reporters, who are using fewer sources and writing fewer local stories (2004, p. 6).

The results of the newspaper's sales to subsequent chains is not surprising, but they are troubling and indicative of industry-wide trends in general, whether a newspaper goes through an ownership change or not. Along with Maguire's findings on the quality of the journalism being produced, his study also lends valuable insight into the emphasis newspapers in small markets (Oshkosh's population was just shy of 64,000 in 2004) place on sports, particularly professional sports. While Maguire found that quality changed significantly, for the worse, over the course of the newspaper's ownership changes between 1996 and 2002, professional sport's position as the most frequently reported subject remained steady throughout the entire period (2004). Maguire points to Oshkosh's close proximity to Green Bay, the home of the National Football League's Packers, as a major contributing factor to these findings, but as this research has shown, professional sport's powerful male audience commodity was surely considered as subsequent owners maintained the paper's high level of coverage with the hopes of attracting readers.¹⁸

¹⁸ Also of note from Maguire's study was the place of amateur sport in the *Northwestern's* content. High school sports ranked inside the top 10 content areas with three of the newspaper's four owners, peaking at number three with the second ownership group. Interestingly, the fourth ownership group paid little attention to high school sports, with the topic not even ranking inside the top 10 (2004).

Outsourcing and Decreasing Quality

While the death of the sports section has been visible to the public through shrinking numbers of front line reporters, perhaps the most impactful job losses in terms of quality have been behind-the-scenes, as deskers—those once tasked with editing stories and laying out pages—have become a relic of newspapers past. As noted earlier, Postmedia has worked to cut costs through the centralization of operations in Hamilton, where chain-wide deskers now service newspapers ranging from Vancouver to Montreal, handling the vast majority of story editing and page layout. While the move to using these centralized deskers was introduced to cut costs, it has also been a contributing factor to declining quality in the eyes of journalists on the ground, who no longer have the ability to work with a known colleague who understands the local context and can provide feedback and direction for future articles. Even for emerging journalists, who have developed during the newspaper industry's rapid evolution from print to web, the loss of deskers has been striking.

We have no staff, and the staff that we do have has been replaced by generic copy handlers in a place that no matter how hard they try, they can't be that person that was bought out in the last five years. All those people that were bought out in the last five years lived here, read the copy all week, listened to the radio, and had a sense of what was happening here. That's really tragic too—that's lost. I don't know what the setup is in Hamilton [...] but I think it's someone gets a sheet thrown in front of them

and [they] make sure it fits, does a spell check, a quick lookover and it's gone. That's not good enough (December 4, 2013).

In addition to the lack of a local connection, the fact that Hamilton is now tasked with servicing newspapers from across the country, ranging from Montreal to Vancouver, means that once one job is done, it is on to the next newspaper and the next local print deadline. These time constraints have very real quality control implications, as journalists noted the seeming rush from Hamilton to get through their copy and on to the next task. The hurry to move on to the next newspaper's copy has created an environment prone to error, as mistakes may be noted by the journalist, but cannot be altered in time to make print deadlines. For experienced journalists, who worked for decades in an environment that allowed for dialogue with the people editing their stories, the inability to catch and correct mistakes in a timely manner is deflating.

If you make a mistake now in your story, you're kind of hooped. Hamilton is two hours ahead, so the minute that story is there, five minutes later they're, 'thank you very much—we're going home.' Whereas if you had someone in our sports department, you could phone back 20 minutes later and say you made a mistake and correct it. The whole Hamilton thing is like outsourcing (November 19, 2013).

Overall the lack of oversight in Hamilton is clearly not the fault of the deskers working there. These individuals, just like the journalists whose stories they are editing, are overworked and under deadlines, the likes of which had never been seen before the rise of digitization. In general, the outsourcing of desker functions

to Hamilton, for which every Postmedia newspaper save the *National Post* is outside their local print circulation area, has been a major demoralizing force. Not only have local colleagues been sent packing, but quality standards have been undermined, while journalists themselves are blamed for a lack of quality. For journalists, the desire to write a flawless story has always existed, however, the value of deskers and editors has always been paramount to the finished product.

When you had [deskers] around, you were better for it and the paper was better for it. Everyone benefitted. When you take those people away, that's kind of what you get. The reader is kind of left with what I've got. Even if it's little slip ups, or a contextual thing that's overlooked, because I'm writing on deadline and just trying to get something out, there used to be a much tighter chain of command to go through and a lot more stuff was caught before it went out. I think it certainly hurts the quality and that's demoralizing too, right. That's a hard thing to know that you better be spot on, or you're going to look bad (December 4, 2013).

Postmedia is not the only newspaper chain that has looked to centralize local newspaper functions. Another prominent example of the practice in Canada is the *Toronto Star*, which laid off 55 employees in 2013—half of which came from the editorial department—in favour of outsourcing copy editing and page design to Pagemasters North America in order to cut costs (Ladurantye, 2013). Companies like Pagemasters North America, which is owned by The Canadian Press, exist so newspapers can “[s]ave money with efficient, centralized production of high quality pages tailored to[newspaper’s] specifications” (Pagemasters, 2014). As

Ryerson journalism professor John Gordon Miller wrote after the move, the *Star's* decision to nearsource—as Pagemasters terms its business, given its operations are in North America—its copy-editing and layout was “entirely economic [...] as] the top rate for a Pagemasters editor is \$48,000, while the salary for the same job at the *Star* is close to \$85,000” (Miller, 2013). With such a discrepancy in the costs of keeping editing and layout jobs in house versus outsourcing, it is blatantly clear that like Postmedia, the *Star* is looking at the short-term bottom line benefits of the move and not the long-term impact that scholars like Meyer and Kim warned of in their work on quality.

The Digital Push

As John Feather pointed out in the mid-1990s—well before the drastic decline of the newspaper industry set in—“the survival of newspapers as mass medium has been achieved by adaptation to changed circumstances” (Feather, 1994, p. 53). Indeed, this was the case for the newspaper industry over the course of the 20th century, as first radio and later television threatened the position of newspapers as the premier news delivery medium. While these technological advancements greatly changed the circumstances under which the newspaper industry operated, the same can be said of the rise of the Internet and its ability to combine every medium into a single package on a newspaper website. Multimedia journalism has been defined formally in two different ways: first, as a news story package on a website using two or more mediums (Deuze, 2003), and also as the “integrated presentation of a news story package through different media, such as [...] radio,

television, teletext, [and] print newspapers (Deuze, 2007, p. 140). Both definitions are illustrations of convergence and concentration, as multimedia journalism is increasingly being practiced by media outlets that are leaning on fewer journalists to do more work, for a wide variety of platforms.

At Canwest, the company had attempted Deuze's second definition of multimedia—where content was produced and shared across print (newspaper chain) and television (Global television). In addition, journalists at Postmedia are increasingly expected to do much more than write; they also regularly collect audio and video, shoot photos, update blogs, and microblog on Twitter on a constant basis (Compton & Benedetti, 2010). This strategy has led to increased pressures on a smaller work force. In the case of Postmedia, the four-platform approach, discussed in detail in an earlier chapter, was unveiled at the *Ottawa Citizen* on May 20, 2014—the first Postmedia newspaper to unveil the four-platform strategy.¹⁹ *Citizen* senior writer Andrew Duffy unveiled the paper's new look and varying digital focuses through a corporately crafted story that explained:

The strategy represents a bold investment in the future at a time when many newspapers are retrenching under pressure from an industry-wide slump in ad revenue.

¹⁹ During the interview process journalists from across Postmedia expressed varying degrees of familiarity regarding the four-platform strategy. Not surprisingly, a journalist from the *Ottawa Citizen* was the most well-versed with the strategy, as Postmedia had planned to first unveil the strategy with the *Citizen*. The May 20 launch of the strategy came roughly four-and-a-half months after Postmedia had hoped, as conveyed by the *Citizen* journalist, who had been told the launch date would be January 2014.

“We’ve reinvented each one of our products from the ground up — from a completely blank canvas,” said Wayne Parrish, chief operating officer of Postmedia Network Canada Corp. and the man in charge of transforming the business.

That transformation begins with today’s newspaper and extends to the Citizen’s website, its tablet and smart phone editions. The four-platforms will feature news, information and ads created and designed to take advantage of the strengths of each medium and to serve each platform’s unique audience (Postmedia News, 2014).

The long term success of Postmedia’s four-platform strategy in terms of both attracting targeted audiences and, more importantly, securing advertisers for those markets remains to be seen. The question of whether or not the chain has the number of journalists needed to successfully cater to varying platforms will only become clear in the future. Leading up to the implementation of the four-platform strategy, the vast majority of content journalists produced—specifically stories—was not repurposed for various platforms. Rather content was used across all four-platforms without any significant change. Journalists themselves acknowledged that while this is not ideal, it is a reality due to the size of newsrooms across the chain.

You can have different stuff in the newspaper if we had more bodies.

There’s not enough people, so what you write for the website, pretty much goes in the newspaper too. There’s not enough time in the day and not enough bodies to edit it properly, or make it look different in the

newspaper, so you pretty much take the same stuff that you write [online] and it goes in the newspaper too (November 28, 2013).²⁰

Journalists awaiting the full implementation of the four-platform strategy, expressed skepticism. For the most part, journalists were supportive of the concept of providing different content for different platforms, but doubted the plan's ability to make an impact given the continuing cuts to manpower. One journalist was especially skeptical about Postmedia's ability to fulfill its four-platform vision, given the chain's staff size.

The digital first stuff is, you know, just a façade because there are not enough people around to do it [...] When the four-platform stuff comes in, the way that it stands now is that [...] if I write a story for the newspaper, that story has to be repurposed four different times for each platform. So if I want to put it on the iPad, it has to be written differently for PC, for mobile. I just said, "What!?" and everybody just looked and said, "Yeah, well, that's just what it is." It's a great thing for a newspaper chain with no money and no resources. Now we have to do the stories four different ways (January 7, 2014).

The increased pressure that journalists anticipate as a result of the four-platform strategy has led to open frustration from even the most veteran print journalists, who find it difficult to provide quality work for both print and digital platforms, as the two are still governed by very different sets of conventions. Varying rules

²⁰ It is important to note from this quote that no longer is content for the print edition simply put online without alteration, as was done in the early days of the web. Instead, web content is now used in the print edition without any significant change.

for print and digital range from deadlines, which are significantly different given the constraints of the two platforms, to the type of content that appears in print and online. Overall, the different rules governing print and digital has led to resistance from some journalists, who believe the answer is not a four-platform approach, but instead a comprehensive strategy focused solely on digital news production, both for the web and mobile application, which would eliminate print edition deadline issues altogether.

I don't think we have enough resources to deliver the kind of quality either to the print content, or the web content and people have noticed. Our print numbers continue to decrease for obvious reasons. There's a lot of content that used to be in our paper that just isn't there anymore, so we trained our readers for years and years and years that they could expect a comprehensive package in our print and it's just not there anymore [...]

I'd feel better if they gassed the newspaper and said we just write for the website now. It's more 24 hours a day. I can do that. I can write fast, I can write accurate. I would much rather do that knowing what I wrote [would be available to everyone online] (November 28, 2013).

Predictably, nostalgia for the print edition remains high among older sports journalists, who for the most part fall into the generation Postmedia outlined as 'Boomers'—the group that was to be targeted by the print edition under the four-platform strategy. Still, despite the connection sports journalists have with the print edition, there is consensus that in a time of limited resources, it will be Postmedia's ability to provide insightful and entertaining *digital* content, and not

its dying print base, that will determine whether or not the company will be relevant in the media landscape moving forward. For one career journalist, who has worked at numerous levels across the newspaper industry, the content produced for digital platforms is the key to success in both the short and long term.

It's not that I don't care about the paper. I do, but I see the pendulum switching to where the web is the more important thing. The two can complement each other, but if we have limited resources, we really need to make sure we do well on the web. Now I sound like I'm a four-platform convert, but those things will probably dictate our survival (November 19, 2013).

The Increased Dominance of the Major Leagues

Job cuts have had a significant impact on actual newspaper coverage and the institutionalized work routines of remaining staff – developments that have been accompanied by a decisive shift in the type of content that appears in the sports pages. In the world of sports, there has always been a tremendous appetite for professional sports coverage, and with shrinking newsrooms, the percentage of coverage devoted to professional sports both in print and online has never been greater. Major-league sporting events are now the unquestioned focal point for the daily newspaper's sports section (Lowes, 1999). Increasing professional sports coverage has been an emerging trend across the Postmedia chain, with a particular

focus on the National Hockey League and the league's seven Canadian teams. With all but one of Canada's NHL markets—Winnipeg being the only exception—home to a Postmedia newspaper, the chain's sports coverage is built on the NHL and the massive appetite for coverage of professional sports. In turn, Postmedia journalists are increasingly handcuffed to the ebbs and flows of game coverage, as opposed to more in-depth feature articles that may require greater legwork. The impact of increased dependence on professional game coverage has meant the decline of the amateur sports pages, as noted by the following journalist, who acknowledges non-mainstream sports as being increasingly marginal to the newspaper industry.

Well, we don't have enough people, so the range of content has diminished and I think we're much more chained to game coverage and mainstream pro sports as well. We're less likely to be devoting time and space to university sport, high school sport, amateur sport—non-mainstream sport (January 14, 2014).

With newspapers spending less time covering non-professional sports, including high school and university athletics, the newspaper's position as all things to all sports fans has gradually eroded. From personal experience, when the *Edmonton Journal* cut down its high school and university coverage through the slashing of the paper's weekly full-page features on each—which I was responsible for during the 2011-12 athletic school year—the feedback from readers was resoundingly negative. This is to be expected given the natural inclination for frustration when any coverage is lessened, but this phenomenon has not been

unique to any one Postmedia market, as other journalists noted the negative fallout surrounding a decrease in amateur sports coverage.

There was a time when I think that the newspapers, ours in particular, set an agenda in our market as to what was going on because we [...] were all things to all people. As time went on, we slowly [...] decided what it is that we did best and decide what we didn't. And we sent [...] oh boy, I can't begin to tell you the number of sports readers that we sent away, and maybe we're partly responsible for the demise in some cases (January 27, 2014).

The decline of amateur sports coverage has not been confined to Postmedia's largest markets, as across the chain the amount of resources and ultimately newspaper and digital space devoted to non-professional sports is shrinking. Even for newspapers in markets where no major professional sports teams reside, like Saskatoon and Windsor within the Postmedia context, the sports pages are increasingly reserved for sport's heaviest hitters. Declining attention to amateur sports and its ties to reader demands was highlighted by a journalist from one of Postmedia's two non-pro sports markets, who has spent the vast majority of his career covering the local sports scene.

[Management is] trying to tell us that people don't want to read about local [sports...] which goes against the grain of what we've always believed. They think people want to read about the high profile—the NHL, the professional sports, NFL even and of course, we don't have a professional sport in our market, so that makes things interesting for how

we do things. And you can question the [reader] survey. I kind of have mixed feelings about it because on the ground level, anybody we talk to, they tell us they read the sports for local coverage [...] You do what you're told and you try to adjust and evolve and adapt and that's what we're doing (January 8, 2014).

Undoubtedly Postmedia has lost some subscribers as a result of their shrinking amateur presence, despite newspaper survey results expressing a desire for increased professional sports coverage. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint just how many paid readers have cancelled subscriptions as a result of these types of changes, several outcomes of a hyper-professional focus are evident, but often overlooked. For the journalist cited above, the loss of niche readers could be more impactful than managers, who are looking to appeal to the average sports fan, may think.

I think what's missed is the sum of all these little parts is maybe greater than what people realize. All these little things add up. All these little niche markets. You know, there are some hardcore fans for whatever, whether it's high school sports or coaches, parents, athletes. Midget hockey, there's a lot of interest there, but it's just little pockets [...Managers] view things as what the general reader wants to read about (January 8, 2014).

Within the world of sports, as in other areas of society, such as politics, women have been underrepresented, as sport has been popularly regarded as primarily a man's domain (Bernstein, 2002). While the coverage of women in sport has

increased steadily in newspapers in countries like Australia over the years, women still remain significantly under-covered (Bernstein, 2002). Within the Canadian context, where major-league sport teams represent the focal point for sports sections, women in sport have often been overlooked. The impact of changes to newspaper sports journalism on the coverage of women is an area in which further research would be beneficial, in order to expose the extent to which the sports pages have become even more hyper-masculine in subject matter. The daily newspaper's heavy focus on male sport has been longstanding, thanks in large part to the belief that female sport does not only does not deliver the audience commodity necessary for newspapers to profit, but also the fact that sports sections are dominated by male journalists and managers (Kian, 2007).

Along with fewer opportunities for women to be covered in the sports pages, there are now fewer opportunities for young journalists to hone their skills at a daily newspaper, covering amateur sports. Many journalists over the years got a start working as freelancers, covering high school and university athletics before graduating to more prestigious beats, including the NHL. Entry-level opportunities covering amateur sports are now few and far between. The loss of a training ground has been an overlooked aspect of the decline of the newspaper industry, as full-time job cuts and high profile departures have overshadowed the loss of entry-level jobs, as noted by one journalist, who worked his way up to a full-time position.

If you're out in the field writing and you're not in the office a lot, you don't see the shrinking office, the depleted staff that way, but it's really hit

home for me even in the last six months. You lose the people and you start to see the coverage shrink. I don't know how often we've covered [the local university lately...] I think stuff like that helps younger writers develop. I think it helped me so much, just being at the [university] and covering these different sports, and seeing how teams work, and covering high school stuff—finding stories at that level. You're learning as a journalist as you go, and I think that's being taken away. That's disappointing. That's the hard stuff to see in the last six months of the last year (December 4, 2013).

With major-league sports now accounting for more coverage within Postmedia newspapers than ever before, producing compelling stories about the professional level is now the sports section's unquestioned focus. When it comes to catering to Canadian readers' seemingly insatiable appetite for professional sports and specifically the National Hockey League, Postmedia has put an increasing percentage of resources towards covering Canada's favourite league. As amateur sports coverage has gone by the wayside, so too has the newspaper's position as all things to all sports fans. Instead, sites dedicated to specific sports, or even teams, have emerged as a means for newspapers to try and capture the digital media market, which affords readers the ability to pick and choose from a diverse set of news sources. Looking to tap into specific fan niches, Postmedia has embraced projects such as the *Edmonton Journal's* Cult of Hockey—a blog dedicated to all things Edmonton Oilers. Along with the Cult of Hockey, blogs at other Postmedia newspapers, such as the *Montreal Gazette's* Inside/Out Hockey,

or the *Ottawa Citizen's* Senators Extra, have successfully carved out a place in the blogosphere as a gathering place for fans. Despite being successful in terms of driving page views for their respective newspapers, the economics of newspaper blogs dedicated to a small percentage of overall readership remains troubling for the chain.²¹ In the following chapter several bloggers from the Cult of Hockey, along with journalists from other Postmedia niche sports sites share their experiences with Postmedia's growing desire to capture the online sports market, shedding light on both the successes and shortcomings of the wild west of the sports blogosphere.

Revisiting the Relationship: Journalists and Major-League Sport

No change has had a more significant impact on the relationship between sports journalists and the teams they cover than the rise of digitization. Increasingly major-league sport organizations, whether they be individual teams, or entire leagues, are turning to their own digital means of disseminating information and connecting with their fan bases. As noted earlier, a strong historical criticism of sports journalists has been their cozy relationship with sports teams and organizations—the very people they are expected to write critically about—which some argue has prevented the profession from holding organizations to account (Rowe, 2007). Often spoon-fed stories, early sports journalists were used by

²¹ No longer is geography the constraining force with respect to audience for newspapers. Newspapers are now in a digital battle for page views, looking to impress advertisers not by beating a competing newspaper, but by beating any website with similar subject matter on the Internet.

teams for promotional purposes to cultivate audiences and spread their message, with the most trusted journalists—those who did not distort the organization’s message—receiving the steadiest stream of information, quotes and stories. While not all sports journalists are eager to be utilized in this manner, this practice remains part of sports journalism and the media sport cultural complex in general. However, as we shall see, such practices are relied on less and less by sports organizations, as digitization has afforded them the ability to spread their own commercial and promotional messages directly to fans and other markets. This chapter will examine further how the relationship between sports journalists and major-league sport has changed in the media sport cultural complex in the digital era, and the real implications of these developments on newspaper chains such as Postmedia and sports journalists. Once closely connected, the financial interests of the mainstream media and major-league sport organizations are increasingly at odds, as major-league sport no longer leans on media outlets to disseminate the majority of news. Instead, teams are utilizing their own digital means to spread their message and profit directly from it, with the mainstream media playing a decreasing role for major-league sports teams with respect to communicating with their fans. The fundamental shift that is ongoing within the media sports cultural complex has forced mainstream media outlets, particularly newspapers, who cannot compete for major-league broadcast rights, to provide consumers with new forms of coverage. One clear example of how Postmedia has changed its major-league sports coverage is the rise of blogger-generated content on major-league sport, like the *Edmonton Journal’s* Cult of Hockey blog, which focuses on the

NHL and the city's beloved Edmonton Oilers. As will become clear from this chapter, bloggers like those writing for the Cult of Hockey, have risen to prominence thanks to digitization and the eroding relationship between journalists and major-league sport.

Digitization and the Power of PR

There was a time when sport teams and organizations relied on the media to deliver their message, and public relations staff worked hard to ensure that their team was being given coverage, and hopefully, that the message was positive. Thanks to the power of digitization, sport organizations now have direct control over the message they spread to fans. As Lowes (1999) pointed out, traditionally major-league sport organizations relied heavily on sending press releases to the media to spread news. These press releases, as they still do to this day, contained a detailed account of the news event, background information and quotes from source representatives (Lowes, 1999, p. 56). However, with the rise of digitization, major-league sport organizations no longer require a press release to generate a story, or spread their message to fans. Teams now can achieve all the aims once satisfied by a press release through their website, or social media platforms – most notably Twitter. Thanks to the power afforded them by these digital platforms, major-league sport organizations now have their own employees producing content about the team and distributing it; these employees do not follow any journalistic code of ethics, but rather a code of corporate conduct, which seeks to protect a brand. As Scherer and Jackson (2008) point out in their

study of Allblacks.com—the online home for New Zealand’s All Blacks national rugby team—team-produced media is governed by “institutional pressures to police a ‘clean’ spectacle of consumption, which promotes the interests of sponsors, media organizations and players and protects the rugby union’s most valuable asset: the All Blacks brand” (p. 201). Ultimately, newspaper sports journalists are decreasingly serving as middlemen in the delivery of messages from sport organizations to their fans. As a result, the most valuable content produced by sports journalists is no longer factual in nature. Newspaper editors are looking for content that is highly opinionated, analytical and oftentimes critical of major-league sport organizations performance. The goal is no longer to provide factual information about teams, as teams can provide that themselves, but to provide readers with a commentary and analysis that they, theoretically, should not be able to find elsewhere. The shift towards opinion and analytical content has resulted in significant changes to sports journalists’ work routines, with increased pressure to produce unique content. In the case of Postmedia, this has meant the rise of blogs like the Cult of Hockey, which serves to provide the type of unique opinion-based content that team sites can and will not provide for fear of dirtying the corporate brand. However, *Edmonton Journal* blogger Jonathan Willis, who writes for the popular Cult of Hockey blog notes that whether or not sport organizations can cut out the media depends on the market.

If the Edmonton Oilers played in Columbus, they wouldn’t exist in Columbus. They’d be gone. So for a lot of markets, we’re not going to see that because they still need the people at traditional outlets. They need

every scrap of coverage they can get and because they have that incentive, they can't afford to cut media out. But definitely, the second point is, in a major market like Edmonton, they have no incentive at all. If I'm the Oilers organization, there's no reason, absolutely no reason to give something to [the independent mainstream media] that I can feed internally. That I can give to one of my guys and boost the credibility of my guy and because I know that my guy is going to take the message and put it out the way I want it. I think it's a shame and I think we'll see lessened coverage as a result of it but I don't know why the team would do it any other way. There's no reason for them to do anything outside their own interests and their own interests are getting the message out and once they don't need the newspapers to do that, they won't bother (January 15, 2014).

Just as digitization has allowed newspapers to disseminate information instantly through their websites, similar opportunities are now enjoyed by every organization that has embraced the power of the web. While not all sport organizations have invested heavily in their websites and the accompanying manpower needed to provide content, many prominent sport organizations have rapidly expanded their digital presence in recent years, as the costs of technology have fallen and team's emphasis on providing their own messages has increased. The decreasing role of newspapers as the preferred avenue for the dissemination of team messages has been a trend across North American professional sports at both the individual team level and league-wide, as the National Hockey League,

like the National Football League, Major League Baseball and National Basketball Association, have all established robust web presences and their own cable television networks that have contributed significantly to the reshaping of their relationship with sports journalists. Within the Canadian context, National Hockey League teams have been the first to fully embrace the creation of a robust digital content strategy, as teams now employ an increasing number of digital content providers to write stories, capture audio, and video, and engage with fans via social media, most notably Twitter²². Sports teams have used Twitter to increase their control over the release of news and decrease, or in some cases virtually eliminate, their reliance on traditional media outlets to reach audiences (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). These digital tools are now the preferred means for the dissemination of team news and as many journalists noted over the course of this research, team employees are now granted preferred access to athletes, coaches and managers—historically the most valuable sources/currency for sports journalists. In the words of one veteran sports columnist, who had experience working for multiple Postmedia newspapers in major sports markets, the elimination of third-party media coverage has been a long-sought goal for all major professional sports leagues in North America.

All of the teams have a big digital crew. I mean, I think that's [NHL commissioner] Gary Bettman's dream—to replace newspapers and

²² Several major-league sports teams in North America have taken producing their own content beyond their websites, branding their own television networks. Canadian examples of this practice include the NHL's Toronto Maple Leafs and NBA's Toronto Raptors through both Leafs TV and Raptors TV. These specialty channels are owned and operated by Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, which owns the Leafs and Raptors.

journalists with their own coverage. Just like the NFL and Major League Baseball. Access is certainly an issue. It's very difficult to get a player away separately. You know, when I started covering this team in like '95 or '96, one of the first things you did at the beginning of the year is to walk around the dressing room and get phone numbers from all the players (January 7, 2014).

As this journalist alluded to, with teams and major leagues no longer relying on journalists to disseminate their message, access to all team employees, most notably players, is now a closely guarded commodity by various franchises. As a result, the informal conversations and personal relationships with sources that were once key for sports journalists to do their jobs are now difficult to cultivate, given the constraints oftentimes being placed on sources by their own organizations. Public relations employees are now tasked with limiting journalist access, as opposed to facilitating it, as had been the case in the past. Organizations' desire to channel all communications through their public relations department has eroded sports journalists' most valuable sources, who were more accessible in the past. Lowes (1999) highlighted what sources truly matter when he said:

The real sources [the sports journalist] is alluding to range from the obvious – athletes, coaches, management officials – to the not so obvious – front-office staff, equipment managers and trainers, and player agents. Taken together they coalesce to become vital components of the sports journalism machine, providing huge amounts of information that would

not be available to reporters were they solely to rely on media relations people (p. 79).²³

With media relations officials now controlling more and more of the access available to sports journalists, the vital sources Lowes cites are decreasingly accessible. At times, if sports journalists do access these sources without the consent of media relations officials, the result can be troublesome for journalists. As Hutchins and Rowe point out, “in an age of tight media management of sportspeople, merely seeking direct, unfiltered access to an athlete can lead to a journalist being ‘struck-off fairly theatrically’” (2012, p. 137). Lowes (1999) identified two forms of source sanctioning, as organization members can physically sanction journalists – as was the case when *Globe and Mail* journalist Al Strachan was confronted by then Toronto Maple Leafs assistant coach Mike Nykoluk after an article Nykoluk perceived to be negative – or the far more common form of sanctioning, that being the loss of access for journalists (p. 83). Limited access to athletes and coaches has become a major frustration for journalists, who have seen the lifeblood of a traditional sports story slow to a virtual trickle in short order. Major-league sport organizations have not always served to limit access, as Lowes notes media relations officials for major-league sport organizations at one time believed their role was instead to facilitate news work and provide journalists with “efficient service” through “the controlled

²³ Drawing on personal experience, having a strong relationship with a team’s equipment manager and trainer can be an excellent tool, not necessarily for generating quotes, but more importantly, developing story leads. These individuals spend more time around the team than even the coaches and are often strong sources for any malcontent among players.

‘dissemination of information’ in accord with the promotional interests of the team (Lowes, 1999, p. 50).” While major-league sport media relations departments still in many ways serve to facilitate news work for journalists, the level of access they now facilitate is increasingly to maximize efficiency for players and coaches, as opposed to journalists themselves, and protect unique content for rights holders. The difficulty of decreased access for journalists has been compounded by the fact that the access now granted has become less meaningful; one-on-one interviews are rare, with scrums, or group interviews, becoming more common. For veteran journalists, the shift away from personal relationships and interviews has been particularly difficult to adapt to. As one sports journalist, who has more than four decades of experience, pointed out, the development of a team and league media presence has been particularly challenging for an industry undergoing tremendous upheaval.

In our business the most frustrating thing is that all the sports teams have their own website and they feed the stuff to their own website. You’re often finding out news from their website after the fact. If a player is hurt [...] they made a trade, it’s on their website first. They give it to them. And the pack mentality of a media person now is such that everybody gets the same thing after the website people. If you want to talk to a player, the three TV cameras and two newspaper writers are talking to him at the same time. You’re not getting guys by themselves, so everybody gets the same stuff, which I don’t like. It never used to be like that. That’s the way

most team organizations want to work things now. Do it once and everybody gets the same thing (November 28, 2013).

All media outlets now have the same quotes as the competition to use in a story. In contrast, team employees are granted increasingly valuable one-on-one interview opportunities with athletes and coaches. The content generated by these one-on-one interviews is packaged in such a way to align with the organization's public relations strategy, while providing fans with 'exclusive' stories to drive traffic to the team's own website.²⁴

But for journalists, it is increasingly difficult to produce something unique, breaking, or even interesting. As one sports journalist put it, "[p]art of that controlled news gathering and the spoon feeding is the inability to get to know people as people and not as interview subjects" (January 27, 2014). The homogenization of independent media coverage through scrums has become especially prevalent for Canadian sports journalists covering the NHL, as noted by one Postmedia NHL beat writer.

Now they're controlling the news in a way that they never used to and that makes it difficult. It makes it difficult for reporters, because a lot of times it's pack journalism. You have the web team in there and they're sort of poaching your stuff. It's very complicated and that's what's been a big change. I don't know how we solve that either. Again, if I'm a fan, I may

²⁴ Teams are using their website as a revenue generator, much like they have used space at their games (such as rink boards) to generate ad revenue. Ad space is sold on team websites, along with sponsorship for certain web features. For example, the Oilers run 'In Focus' video segments—news videos relating to the team—that are sponsored by Boston Pizza, with the company's logo featured in the lower left hand corner of the video throughout.

be inclined to go to the [team] site, because they have five people at a practice compared to one of me, so they're going to have more content and so they should. That's been a big change. Before they used to send out press releases, or let you know when they're going to be sending something out and now they tweet news, or [publish it] on their website. Now we're always following and chasing the team. They have their own avenue for getting news out now and we're not in it anymore (December 10, 2013).

The trend towards team control and dissemination of desirable information has emerged as arguably the most troublesome issue for sports journalists, with this frustration even trumping the perceived threat bloggers may pose to traditional print journalists (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). This situation contrasts starkly with the historical relationships that sports journalists would carve out with team officials, and players, who once were used to provide insight and information. All of these developments were highlighted as major hurdles by the sports journalists interviewed, including both NHL and CFL beat writers, who are experiencing similar trends covering both leagues.

I just find covering the NHL in Canada is impersonal in my opinion. You go into the locker room at home and every scrum has 20 cameras and reporters in it and it's very hard to actually sit down and talk with someone and get any sort of original journalism. The only chance I found for that was when you were on the road with the team down in the States. From a journalistic perspective, because the NHL is so big in Canada, it's

hard to get close to your subjects and do anything original. Not impossible, but it's hard (January 14, 2014).

This year I don't think I had any one-on-one time with anybody... Some of these guys are more vibrant and more alive than others and they're entertainers in scrums, putting on a bit of a show. You can't get inside them and find out what it's like, plus all my questions show up on everyone else's websites, so I get a little bit frustrated by that. We got to pick our stories of the year, and I was reading through my stuff to try and find my best stories of the year and they were all shallow. There's nothing really there other than day-to-day grinding and what I learn about the guys on the road. It's very frustrating and it's all scrum based (January 10, 2014).

In order to deal with this new reality, many journalists are now striving to produce analytical and opinion-driven content as a means to separate their stories from those of their media competitors, and those produced by the teams themselves – a key development that points to a substantial transformation in the work routines of the journalists themselves, and subsequently the content that appears in the media. A shift in focus, from an emphasis on recounting events for those who were not present, to stories focused on the interpretation of events, has been a major consequence of the shift brought about by the combination of digitization

and the presence of sports franchises' robust internal coverage teams.²⁵ These changes to the media landscape have forced journalists, especially those on highly competitive beats, to substantially alter their work routines, as was the case for the following journalist, who covers one of Canada's most popular pro franchises.

I'm always under pressure and stress to advance the story. Even in game stories. I don't write game stores anymore. I have to write contextual and analytical stories on everything. Everyone has seen the game. Everyone has heard all the clips. They want to know what I can break down and what I can offer from having 30 years experience in the game. What I can do to advance the game [...] Now I'm part columnist, part analyst, part reporter and all that in 700 words. That's been a big change in my world (January 10, 2014).

As this quote highlights, sports journalists are now being asked to produce content that is highly analytical in nature and far less concerned with the recounting of events, but instead with how they perceive the story will develop moving forward. Now more than ever, it is the role of the journalist to provide readers with information that cannot be found on a major-league sport organization's website. Achieving the goal of providing readers with content they value has changed the work routines and labour practices of traditional sports journalists, but also helped spur the rise of mainstream blog content for daily newspapers.

²⁵ Along with the power of the Internet, every NHL, MLB, NBA and NFL game is now available through a variety of means, such as television specialty packages (ex. NHL Centre Ice) and online webcast packages. Thus, the need to describe specific plays from a sporting event that can be seen either live or via highlight programs has been eliminated.

Welcome to the Blogosphere: The New Order for Sports Journalists

In addition to individual journalists looking to differentiate their product from the pack in the digital era, individual newspapers have also worked to cultivate a defined, online sports brand, as they are fighting to attract readers despite having decreased resources and increased overlap in coverage with their competition. The trend towards more analytical, and oftentimes opinionated stories from journalists, who were once looked to as unbiased observers, has not only significantly altered the work being produced by journalists, it has also blurred the line between journalists and bloggers, as newspapers embrace blogging by both salaried staff and ‘fan bloggers.’ Fan bloggers, in general terms, are those who cover a team from afar and with an identified bias as a supporter of the team. Despite the growing popularity of fan bloggers, largely due to their embrace of non-traditional focuses such as advanced stats²⁶, their presence has been frustrating for veteran sports journalists, who still view access, regardless of how diminished it has become, as legitimizing their work. With access differentiating many journalists from their blogging counterparts, one of journalists’ greatest

²⁶ Advanced stats, with reference to hockey specifically, can be defined as those stats which supplement basic, traditional statistics (such as goals, assists, points, penalty minutes). There are numerous advanced stats, which all in varying ways seek to provide metrics for both individual players and teams using non-traditional statistics. These advanced stats all ultimately serve to compare and predict future success, just like traditional stats, albeit by focusing on more nuanced aspects of the sport. Examples of popular advanced hockey statistics at an individual level at the time of this thesis include Corsi rating (shots attempted at the opponent’s net minus shots attempted against) and zone start data (the percentage of time when a player starts in the offensive zone).

frustrations lies with how newspapers present their work as equal to the work of bloggers, despite the difference in access.

I guess what bothers a serious journalist most is the people who write now on the internet—and every paper’s got them—is they offer up their opinions, but they never actually talk to the athletes. I don’t know how you can be a journalist and be portrayed on the website as a journalist if you’ve never actually talked to an athlete (November 28, 2014).

As George Brock pointed out in his book *Out of Print: Newspapers, journalism and the business of news in the digital age*, “[m]any 21st-century bloggers are provisional, part-time and polemical” – all characteristics that frustrate journalists, who have witnessed the rise of bloggers, and a subsequent sharing of the spotlight once held solely by journalists in the print world (Brock, 2013). The work of bloggers is now prominent both online and in print across the Postmedia chain in several newspapers.²⁷ But with access holding less value for traditional journalists and the popularity and acceptance of bloggers increasing, as evidenced by their elevated presence within mainstream outlets, the role of bloggers as part of the media is poised to grow, and the line between journalists and bloggers blurs by virtue of audience acceptance. The lack of delineation between the work of journalists and bloggers—both visually online and in print, along with the perception among journalists that management views all content producers as a

²⁷ Several Postmedia bloggers have experienced extensive popularity online, cultivating a significant following. For example Harrison Mooney, who writes for the *Vancouver Sun*’s popular blog *Pass it to Bullis* along with several other online outlets, has over 15,000 followers on Twitter. For comparison sake, the *Sun*’s sports columnist Cam Cole has over 16,000 followers.

single unit—has created friction within some newspapers in the broader context of the contested labour relations that were discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, part of the perceived threat is that bloggers are often paid on a freelance basis, providing relatively cheap, productive labour, while full-time staff continues to shrink, and other journalists and employees are terminated. These increasingly precarious labour relations were highlighted by one sports journalist, who himself has been active with his own blog for nearly a decade, but was well aware that the growth of bloggers is a potential threat to traditional journalists.

At our paper we tend to cannibalize our own people and their brand. That I've never understood. I don't understand it to this day. I do understand they're getting a lot of page views, so that's justified, but you're essentially training your readers that if you go to our website and want to know whatever the news of that day is, well it's not a reporter doing that, it's one of these fan bloggers. That I don't think is correct [...] It's hard for me to understand why you would want to sabotage your own people in the name of page views. The only way it would really make sense to me is if there was some quite Darwinian plan afoot, whereby bloggers, if you're paying them peanuts and they become popular, you make them the print guys as well. If that were the end game, that could spell curtains for the veteran reporters, but maybe it would've been a brilliant strategy (November 19, 2013).

The threat that bloggers pose to traditional journalists is both perceived and real, as established journalists have seen their positions as the sole producers of content

challenged by both the teams they cover and the bloggers their newspapers are now employing. Hutchins and Rowe (2012) captured the outright disdain some traditional journalists have for their blogging counterparts by quoting one journalist who said:

I'm eternally frustrated that [...] so-called citizen journalists put themselves on par with the [trained professional] journalist in presenting opinions. Everything I write is based on the fact that I've spoke to people, I've been at the event, that I know stuff off-the-record (p. 143).

In many ways, journalists' frustrations with bloggers, who lack the access of the traditional journalist, ties back to the inherent value of access. For journalists, who have leaned on their access to sources as their greatest asset and source of occupational distinction, a lack of access has brought their own work and that of bloggers closer together, with the same generic quotes from scrums available to every interested party by virtue of the Internet.²⁸ Bloggers have embraced their lack of access for a variety of reasons, including the basic fact that they do not need it to produce the analytical, and opinion-based pieces that have become hallmarks of the sports blogosphere. Bloggers have also celebrated a lack of access thanks to its perceived ability to put bloggers outside the traditional

²⁸ A notable development with respect to teams' ability to spread their message is also the use of mainstream, rights holding outlets. A widespread example of this practice is a team's radio and TV broadcasters, who often times are selected and employed directly by the team. These employees then spread the team's message through these rights holding media outlets, who by in large are given limited editorial control over their broadcasts, ultimately allowing teams to control the message even on 'independent' media outlets. An example of this practice would be the Edmonton Oilers radio broadcast team of Jack Michaels and Bob Stauffer, who are both employees of the team, but broadcast games—and in the case of Stauffer, host a daily radio show—on the team's radio rights holder 630 CHED.

relationship between media and major-league sport that in many ways has historically coloured journalists' work, for fear of having their access revoked. A blogger for a host of websites and mainstream outlets in addition to the *Journal*, Willis sees the pros and cons of the declining opportunities for journalists to break stories.

[Teams] don't go through an independent print outlet most of the time and I think that is unfortunate, because I think it's important in any kind of news situation [...] But for somebody in new media it's fantastic. So it used to be, for instance, the only one at practice who knows what the coach and the players said was the reporters and their stories were 'must read' because they had information nobody else did. Now, the Oilers publish all of those press conferences, all those scrums on their website. And the reporters' stories just breaking that news are basically worthless, because rather than picking their selected quotes, we can watch the whole thing online and parse it as we will rather than be just stuck with their interpretation of it. So it's good in some ways and bad in others. It's good in that [journalists] don't have the kind of 'gatekeeper' role that they used to, but it's bad in that we're not getting the kind of investigative work that I think we used to.

I think the lessened impact of traditional media makes great sense from that perspective, because why would [a team] use a newspaper reporter who might write something you don't like to get your message

out when you can feed it to somebody who works for your team or put it up on your website and step around it entirely? (January 15, 2014).

With fewer journalists, shrinking access to sources and an insatiable appetite for professional sports coverage in the digital era, fan blogs have emerged not only to satisfy the desire for coverage from readers, but also to provide unique and inexpensive coverage and content for mainstream media outlets, such as Postmedia. Thanks to the growth of the Internet, there is no shortage of blogs that have become both popular and credible in the eyes of their readers. One such blog is the *Edmonton Journal's* Cult of Hockey, which has carved out a healthy following among NHL hockey fans in general, and specifically Edmonton Oilers fans, who flock to the blog for insight and analysis.²⁹ By using the declining value of access to athletes, the credibility of the *Edmonton Journal* brand, stories focused on elements not usually found in traditional sports stories—most notably advanced stats—and a group of writers that have proven Internet savvy, the Cult of Hockey has developed into a highly successful meeting place between the blogosphere and mainstream media.

The Cult of Hockey: Carving Out a Mainstream Media Niche

Standing in stark contrast to sports journalism's historically cozy relationship with major-league sport, is the relationship that exists between bloggers and mainstream media, which at best has been tenuous. As evidenced by some of the

²⁹ No concrete page view numbers were accessible for The Cult of Hockey; however, creator David Staples confirmed the blog was at one time Postmedia's most widely read blog of any kind and remains among the chain's most popular blogs in terms of page views.

earlier comments from veteran journalists, blogs are often looked to as lacking credibility and stealing focus from more rigorous and well-informed journalism. This tension is felt by bloggers, including those at the *Cult of Hockey*, like Bruce McCurdy.

There's a fair amount of conflict between the blogosphere and mainstream media. There's a fair amount of disdain in both directions. I don't have a lot of time for it. I don't like it. My thought was there is a meeting place where the two can [co-exist] (December 6, 2013).

Despite the conflict between bloggers and traditional journalists, there are places where the two have been paired together and succeeded—at least with respect to page views and generating online traffic for their hosts. One such example is the *Edmonton Journal's* Cult of Hockey. Started in 2006 by then features writer David Staples as the Cult of Pop—a blog dedicated to popular culture musings—and evolving shortly thereafter into the Cult of Hockey, Staples has helped the *Journal* carve out a niche as an online meeting place for NHL and Edmonton Oilers fans (the most desirable audience commodity). Fans have embraced the blog in the world of online Oilers coverage, often referred to as the 'Oilogosphere.' A longtime fan of the team himself, Staples has successfully tapped into a seemingly endless desire among Oilers fans for news on their team.

I know people love Oilers news in Edmonton. That's why I chose to do this blog. I had a real sense of that. This was a popular topic. If you're going to write about anything and you're a professional writer, you should pick something people want to read about as well. I had a real sense that it

was going to be popular, so no I wasn't surprised [...] This is almost a historic losing streak for this team and yet the readership continues to rise. With the advent of the paywall there's been a little bit of an impact, but not as much on the *Cult of Hockey* as other areas of the paper. We're not going down, we're still going up, so even that hasn't slowed us down. There's a real appetite for the type of coverage that we give (January 10, 2014).

Satisfying the desire for NHL and Oilers content for rabid sports fans in Edmonton is precisely what Staples, and later McCurdy and Willis, who joined in 2010 and 2011 respectively, have been able to accomplish. The success of the blog begins with the wild popularity of its subject matter, the Edmonton Oilers. The strong connection cultivated between the *Cult of Hockey*, its writers, and its readers has been the foundation for the blog's success, following a strategy that the newspaper industry had capitalized on in the past - establishing a connection with a specific community as the foundation for strong journalism (Brock, 2013). But with a host of others in the 'Oilogosphere' connecting with that same community of Oilers' fans, there are several characteristics that have allowed the *Cult of Hockey* to distinguish itself from the many other blogs dedicated to all things Oilers. For Staples, who started with the *Journal* in 1985 and continues on staff with a full-time role as the paper's city hall columnist, one of the blog's greatest strengths is the "mainstream sensibility" it brings to its subject matter and the blog's ability to avoid the sensationalism that is often leveled as a criticism of blogs.

When I compare our work to the other blogs, I just find we're more credible and haven't fallen into the pitfalls that some of the others have fallen into. That comes from having a mainstream sensibility, which is to be fair and accurate. To treat people decently and to put those things first, as opposed to being edgy, or highly critical or pretending that we're

Hunter Thompson (January 10, 2014).

Writing under the *Journal* banner, as opposed to having their work appear on a separate website with no ties to a traditional media outlet, unquestionably has lent credibility to the Cult of Hockey. Despite the fact that Staples and his writers have never been subject to direct editorial control from the newspaper's sports editors, the *Journal's* name provides the sort of instant legitimacy that upstart, independent blogs must work tirelessly to achieve. The *Cult of Hockey's* editorial structure is unique, as there is general autonomy for the blog as a whole and for individual writers, who are not subject to the same editorial scrutiny as journalists writing for the newspaper. Blog posts are not edited prior to being posted; rather, the onus for accuracy is solely on the blogger – a reality that would have been unthinkable for journalists of the past, who relied on editors to not only correct any factual errors, but also aid in the general strengthening of articles. The independence afforded individual bloggers is an increasing trend, as bloggers and journalists alike are encouraged to post stories as soon as possible. During my time at the *Journal*, any breaking news was to be posted in the form of a blog post instantaneously, with the purpose being to cut out the time needed to submit the story through more traditional channels (an editor, who would read the story and

then post online). This policy continues and is indicative of some journalists' frustrations regarding management's preference for being first, but not necessarily right. Affording bloggers and even traditional journalists the ability to post directly also lessens the resources needed, as fewer editors are required by the newspaper. While the Cult of Hockey, as noted above, is not subject to the same editing process as a traditional story is, the *Journal* is nonetheless responsible for the content produced by Staples, McCurdy and Willis, by virtue of hosting their content on the website, and in turn lends its reputation as an established and respected media outlet to everything within the Cult of Hockey.

With the *Journal's* website playing host to both the Cult of Hockey and its sports staff writers' work, and with content from the Cult of Hockey appearing in the print edition of the newspaper, some tension has emerged with respect to internal competition for both web and print prominence. This arrangement represents a unique friction between the blogosphere and mainstream media, as the two have not been asked to co-exist in this exact manner across Postmedia on a chain-wide scale.³⁰ But for Staples, the Cult of Hockey's competition for attention from Oilers fans lies not within the *Journal*, or with other mainstream

³⁰ In 2011, Postmedia newspaper *The Vancouver Sun* entered the blogosphere in a similar way as the Cult of Hockey, after recruiting the popular Vancouver Canucks blog Pass It to Bullis to write under the *Sun* banner. The blog, which had originated as a fan blog, has since been hosted by the *Sun* on a separate site dedicated to sports blogs. Similar to the Cult of Hockey's McCurdy and Willis, the blog's content is produced by freelance bloggers, who are not on the newspaper's staff. As of May 2014, Pass It To Bullis and the Cult of Hockey are Postmedia's only hockey blogs with content production that is outsourced from the newspaper's staff.

news sources, but rather in the broader Oilogosphere and other blogs that are working for a piece of the emerging online sports media pie.

The competition of the Cult of Hockey isn't the *Edmonton Sun*, or *TSN*, it's [blogs like] *Oilers Nation*, *Copper and Blue* and *Lowetide*. These people are right on the news, right away, doing what we do. If we don't do this, the *Journal* loses. We're losing a huge piece of the hockey market if we don't do that. That's why we do it. If a sports writer in our sports department thinks the Cult of Hockey is competing with them, we're not competing with them at the *Journal* internally, we're competing with all these other blogs. I feel it intensely. We are in a hard fought battle with these other start-up blogs, which are extremely popular and if we don't do this work, we will lose that battle and we'll lose the readership war that's coming on the Internet for hockey commentary (January 10, 2014).

This "battle" to carve out a place in the digital media landscape to capture audiences is something that newspapers continue to face on a daily basis, as readers turn away from print and look for their news instantaneously via the Internet on a variety of devices. But perhaps the more pressing issue for newspapers is how to compete in an increasingly specialized and fragmented media market. While the death of print has been well documented, the emergence and success of niche sites like the Cult of Hockey, which cater to a very small percentage of the general public has received far less attention. Readers now have the ability to pick and choose their sources of news based on their specific interests, erasing the place of the newspaper as the hub for all written news. The

fragmentation of the news landscape is a troubling trend for veteran journalists, who realize the newspaper is not and cannot be everything to everyone.

There are ways to keep it relevant and we're not irrelevant, that's not what I'm saying, but the days of the newspaper being this hefty package in which we could deliver something truly compelling, almost regardless of what your interests, or tastes were, are kind of gone. It's not totally gone, but we're thinner and thinner (November 19, 2013).

The reality is that newspapers no longer have the resources to cover the same breadth of events as they once did, and the rise of the Internet has been accompanied by the rise of niche news sites. For new media journalists like Willis, this has been beneficial, as readers are turning to an increasingly diverse set of sites to satisfy their news desires. Additionally, Willis views the increased niche competition as a positive for the end product, as competition for readers has forced journalists and bloggers to produce more desirable content from the perspective of fans. In the eyes of Willis, this has created a more democratic media landscape, where the audience votes with their page views based, not on your job title or who you write for, but rather on the content you produce.

It used to be that the most important guy in town was the columnist with 'X' paper. I think we're moving past that to a point where it's much more individual driven. People aren't necessarily picking one site and going there for their news but they read a bunch of different sites and they pick the individual columnists at each location that they like [...] They don't have to buy it all prepackaged. They choose what they're interested in

reading and I think it's a shame because the market for a story about the Middle East is incredibly important and it's not necessarily getting attention. But in sports, I think it's been a good thing because we're seeing a lot of the filler content that has always been around—it just doesn't get reads anymore because people are able to just read the articles that interest them. I think it forces reporters to be better at their jobs. Forces them to say interesting things. Forces them to go beyond simply going to practice and regurgitating what they were told there. I think that's an unmitigated positive (January 15, 2014).

In the case of Postmedia sports, this has meant the gradual embrace of blogs and sites like the Cult of Hockey, which have tapped into readers' insatiable appetite for a very specific—albeit highly popular—portion of the overall sports scene. The development of specific interest sites, as opposed to general interest, is a trend that is gaining acceptance within Postmedia sports and works to further promote the hyper-professional focus of its various sports sections. In addition to increasing the chain's focus on major-league sport, Postmedia's embracing of blogs and niche sites has altered the relationship that existed between the media and major-league sport organizations as part of the media sports cultural complex. With the rise of blogs, which often times spurn direct access to major-league sport figures, or simply cannot gain access, the close relationship between major-league sport and its messengers – the media – is being challenged. The impact of the distance that is increasingly characterizing the relationship between major-league

sport and non-rights holding media will be a key area of interest in the coming years.

In addition to blogs like the Cult of Hockey, several Postmedia newspapers have poured significant resources into sites focused solely on the NHL. Highlighting Postmedia's commitment to hyper-professional sports coverage is the *Montreal Gazette's* Hockey Inside/Out (formerly Habs Inside/Out), which focuses solely on coverage relating to the Montreal Canadiens, as well as the *Ottawa Citizen's* Senators Extra, which exclusively covers the Ottawa Senators. Similar to the Cult of Hockey, both sites are a meeting point between the blogosphere and mainstream media in many respects, but unlike the Cult of Hockey, content for Hockey Inside/Out and Senators Extra is written by staff journalists from both the *Gazette* and *Citizen*. These sites serve to tap into Canadian sports fans' desire for coverage of their favourite NHL team, as noted by *Citizen* sports editor James Gordon (2010) in one of Senators Extra's first posts when the blog launched in 2010.³¹

We know Senators fans can't get enough news and discussion about their team, so we're giving them something extra this season. We're pleased to introduce SenatorsExtra.com, an extension of the *Ottawa Citizen's* hockey coverage in the newspaper and online.

³¹ Hockey Inside/Out 'lives' outside the main site of the *Gazette*, existing as a stand-alone site (hockeyinsideout.com) that can be accessed through links on the newspaper's main site, or directly. Senators Extra, which at one time existed as a stand-alone site (senatorsextra.com), has since been integrated in the *Citizen's* main site.

New features include daily blog posts from hockey writers Wayne Scanlan, Allen Panzeri, Ken Warren and James Gordon, a Twitter feed for those who want up-to-the-second information, and a collection of interactive features for those who love to talk about the game (September 19, 2010).

The ultimate goal of these sites is to attract readers, in the hope of increasing online advertising revenue. However, like the Cult of Hockey, this strategy has had limited success, as noted by one journalist whose work appears on his newspaper's NHL niche site.

I don't think we're making a whole lot of money on it. I think it's just a page view grabber. The note that [our editor] sends around to us every month is the number of page views and then that gets applause from the advertising people. But we don't see how that generates money (January 7, 2014).

Regardless of how much money the websites/blogs are generating for their respective newspapers, they have certainly resonated with the respective fan bases. For one journalist, covering the local NHL team's every move through his newspaper's NHL niche site is both overkill and a necessity for newspapers looking to tap into a readership that simply cannot get enough.

We could devote every inch of our print product to the [NHL team] and do nothing but that. Some people would be very happy but still say, "You're not doing enough." Other people would say, "It's overkill. You don't need to know everything. You don't need to cover every damn practice or you

don't have to be at every single possible event." And I'd go along with that too.

Sometimes, you look and you say, how much of this [can we do]. We will talk about how obsessed people have become because of their love of the [the team], but we contribute to a lot of that. We're on there with Twitter and with websites and with [the blog]. We contribute largely to the wall-to-wall coverage of these guys so [... the blog] has become sort of a key part of what we're doing. It really does show that [the newspaper] understands, that in this city, you could write about the [NHL team] 13 months of the year (January 29, 2014).

The trend among Postmedia newspapers towards blogs focused on topics nearly guaranteed to resonate with readers, such as the NHL, has become an increasingly important part of the company's business model. Despite revenues still being relatively meager (according to the journalists interviewed), managers are paying increasing attention to the success of NHL niche sites. This trend is shifting the focus of the newspaper further and further away from being all things to all people, both through the content it provides and the clear distinction between coverage areas, with the creation of separate websites for separate interests.

Perhaps this adaptability and abandonment of trying to provide a sports site for all readers is the future of mainstream sports journalism online.³²

³² Another example of a Postmedia newspaper adopting a niche site approach to content provision is the *Vancouver Province*'s stand-alone site dedicated to podcast material. [Theprovincepodcasts.com](http://theprovincepodcasts.com) is a site separate from the newspaper's main site, providing podcast content for web users without having to navigate the paper's main site.

Building the Brand: Cultivate a ‘Personal Brand’ to Stand Out From the Crowd

A large part of the success of blogs like the Cult of Hockey owes to the blog’s formula for generating page views from what has emerged as a steady and loyal audience commodity. Building this reader base can be likened to building a brand where recognition and familiarity have been accomplished by consistently providing readers with a specific type of story, such as the blog’s popular player grades given by a member of the blog after each Oilers game. In addition to these player grades, the Cult of Hockey has also become well-known for its hockey analytics work, with Staples, McCurdy and Willis all embracing the growing interest in advanced hockey statistics, which is becoming more widely accepted than in the past. With readers trained to find stories focused on player grades and analytics, Staples and company have established a brand that appeals to readers based on areas that have often been overlooked by mainstream journalists, providing an opening for bloggers to attract readers to their specific brand of hockey coverage.

There’s a huge appetite for analytical work on hockey that isn’t done by newspaper writers generally. They don’t create their own work and they haven’t interpreted NHL data in a new way, so the mainstream wasn’t and isn’t doing that work generally speaking, so the blogosphere started to do it. I was interested in it and took it in a direction, my own direction (January 10, 2014).

Along with the Cult of Hockey's focus on hockey analytics, the blog has also established itself as a place to find instant commentary on anything and everything to do with the Oilers. This has also helped the blog differentiate itself from the rest of the *Journal's* sports coverage and that of other mainstream media outlets. Together, Staples views the Cult of Hockey increasingly as an analytical blog, shedding its label as a fan blog, which brings with it connotations of excessive bias and a lack of credibility.

Really our blog is an analytical perspective as much, or more than a fan perspective [...] where we see our job, because we have this niche in analytical reporting, is whenever any news comes up on the Oilers from any other news source, including our own *Edmonton Journal* news source, we will take the news and provide commentary, instant commentary. We report the news and then give comment usually based on our analytical/fan perspective, but mainly the analytical perspective. We try to add value to the conversation about the Oilers by adding that voice, so we're on top of the news very quickly and we're on top of the commentary very quickly (January 10, 2014).

The trend towards brand-building by writers of all stripes—bloggers and traditional journalists alike—has emerged as a means to differentiate one's occupational self within the increasingly crowded media landscape and points to the types of entrepreneurial pressures that journalists have been forced to confront as they labour practices have been transformed. Developing a brand occurs at both an individual and organizational level, with newspapers determining what

will be the foundation of their brand and then journalists and bloggers working to cultivate their own identity within the brand space they inhabit. For one veteran CFL writer, establishing a brand has been at the forefront of assuring their personal value to the newspaper.

I was very cognizant of trying to start a brand, so that you become a little more valuable to your paper in a certain sense—that you have something that they want [...] I think that at our newspaper, we had the good sense to, about 3 or 4 years ago, to just sit down and say to ourselves, ‘okay, what are our brands? What are the things people can rely on?’ And we established four pillars in our newspaper and luckily, they decided that football was going to be one of them (January 27, 2014).

Central to the establishment of both a personal brand and a newspaper brand and these broader entrepreneurial pressures has been the use of social media, particularly Twitter, by sports journalists who now produce content throughout the day, including Tweeting and engaging with readers online. As noted in Schultz and Sheffer’s 2010 research on the impact of Twitter on sports journalists, depending on the outlet and age of a sports journalist, Twitter has been looked to for very different purposes. For print journalists, Twitter is first and foremost used as a promotional tool to spread their stories, whereas broadcast journalists look to Twitter as a tool by which they can communicate and interact with their audience, largely by presenting their own opinions on a topic (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). Age also played a significant role in how journalists view and utilize Twitter. Predictably, younger sports journalists were more active in their use of Twitter

than their older counterparts, but using it primarily to break news (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). Not surprisingly, Schultz and Sheffer's research found in general that older print journalists were the most resistant to Twitter: "Although not necessarily critical or resistant to new technologies like Twitter, older journalists and those at print-media outlets seem more tied to the past. They prefer old-school journalism—report, write, and then repeat the next day" (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010, p. 237).

The value of Twitter and building a personal brand are closely intertwined in a digital media world, as Twitter and the Internet's overall ability to spread and popularize content are key in differentiating one's self from the herd of sports writers, both amateur and professional, that scatter the Internet sports landscape. Not surprisingly, bloggers have been among the most eager to utilize Twitter's ability to spread their work and develop a brand. Willis is one clear example of this, as he went from an upstart in the blogosphere to a well-respected source, thanks by in large to his successful use of Twitter to build a following of readers, which he has since brought with him to the *Edmonton Journal*.³³

I was recruited for a specific position because they liked what I'd done in social media. They'd liked what I'd done at other websites. And that's why they were interested in me because there was already a built in audience of readers for my writing. Those opportunities don't arise if

³³ Willis currently ranks third (10,900) in terms of Twitter followers for *Edmonton Journal* sports writers (bloggers and full-time staff), behind only Staples (11,000) and veteran Edmonton Oilers reporter Jim Matheson (25,000). To put into context how popular sports writers at the *Journal* are on Twitter, the only non-sports writer inside the top five in followers is columnist Paula Simons (17,200), who is a distant second behind Matheson.

you're not working really hard to differentiate yourself as an individual rather than a writer for 'X' outlet (January 15, 2014).

While a large part of Willis' brand on Twitter is instant analysis and commentary—hallmarks of both the Cult of Hockey and bloggers in general—the now veteran blogger has made a conscious effort to differentiate himself from fellow bloggers through more traditional means. After doing all his writing from afar in the past, as many bloggers do, Willis spent the 2013-14 American Hockey League season living in Oklahoma City, covering firsthand the Edmonton Oilers' minor league team, the Oklahoma City Barons. This more traditional work setup was a conscious effort by Willis to hone his reporting skills, as he sees the inevitable integration of new and traditional media into a single category.

I think over time, what you'll see is a lot of the people who started out as purely trading in opinion or providing you know, statistical analysis, they'll branch out into breaking news as well. I think it's a long process but [...] eventually it'll happen as they become integrated with traditional media [...] People don't take bloggers seriously and in a lot of cases, for good reason. So you kind of have to stand out from the crowd. You have to differentiate yourself. So for me, if I want to be somebody who people take seriously, I have to do the kind of things that any other reporter would do (January 15, 2014).

Whether it be trading in opinion, stats, or more traditional reporting, increasingly newspaper stories are focused on generating page views. While attracting eyeballs to their product has always been of great importance to newspapers, the advent of

the Internet has meant that newspapers have the ability to measure what stories are truly popular. The importance of tracking page views ties directly to the concept of the audience commodity, as newspapers can track their audience, and in turn sell this audience to advertisers. In the print past, circulation numbers were the dominant metric used by newspapers to determine whether or not their product—the newspaper as a whole—was popular. How popular an individual story was, or whether a certain writer had a large following were difficult to measure, as the overall success of the newspaper in terms of circulation was the only true measurable in terms of readership. Now, with the growth of the Internet and the various metrics it allows newspapers to track, the popularity of individual stories can be tracked. Ultimately, how many readers go through a newspaper's online turnstiles is tied to advertising revenue, just as circulation numbers are for print. In simple terms, the more page views, the higher the value to advertisers. With the ability of newspapers to track how many people are reading specific stories, both writers and editors have been able to keep tabs on the type of stories that resonate with readers and in turn respond to the demands of their readership. This is the case with the Cult of Hockey, which has seen clear trends develop with respect to what type of stories are the most read. For Willis, catering to what his audience wants has meant a shift away from long form analytical, stat-based stories in favour of shorter, more focused stories that have proven to resonate with a larger segment of readers.

What I found over time was just that the audience as a whole, doesn't necessarily want to take the time [...] some of them certainly do, but it's a

small segment of people that really want to get into the numbers of something or look at a single relatively insignificant question from eight different perspectives. So I don't do that as much anymore. And honestly, it makes me a little sad but the other thing is, this is a job and if I'm not writing things the audience is interested in, I'm not going to be of any value to my employer (January 15, 2014).

The push to produce shorter stories and constantly provide new content has been prominent across Postmedia and was emphasized by journalists across the chain throughout the course of this research. Writing shorter stories that are often available online long before they appear in print has been a fundamental shift in the work routines of sports journalists, who were once afforded the ability to watch a sporting event, digest it and produce stories based on some amount of reflection and revision before the public ever laid eyes on it. The days of reflection are all but gone for journalists and bloggers alike, with constant page views the goal for newspapers. Chasing page views has meant writers—journalists and bloggers—have been afforded less of an ability to write longer form stories by mainstream outlets. Like Willis, McCurdy finds himself writing less of what he loves and more of the types of stories that have proven successful in generating page views for the Cult of Hockey.

I'm doing less what I love to do—I almost don't do any historical writing, because nobody reads it. We're driven by page views and readership and I wrote, I thought, a beautiful piece on the Heritage Classic, and I got 500

page views. I can write ‘Don Cherry thinks Nail Yakupov is a dick’ and get 10,000 page views (December 6, 2013).

Generating stories that appeal to readers has always been an important part of the newspaper industry, as subscriptions meant the opportunity to sell larger audiences to advertisers. With the rapid rise of technology and its ability to foster open and instantaneous communication online, a truly continuous production/feedback loop has developed for journalists.

In addition to the content of the stories driving page views and feedback from readers, as part of the continuous circuit of culture (Du Gay, et al., 1997), the online media landscape has also seen a sharp rise in the value of headlines for generating traffic to newspaper websites. While headlines have always functioned as a key means to grab a reader’s attention and bring them into a story, online headlines are increasingly the deciding factor in page views. As mentioned earlier, with readers focused on a specific area of interest, search engines and news notifications for certain keywords are of greater importance to news sites than ever before. Maximizing a headline’s ability to drive page views by incorporating key words is known as search optimization and has become a hallmark of the blogosphere and increasingly mainstream online news stories.³⁴ These headlines are often unimaginative and drab when compared to their print newspaper counterparts, but nonetheless are far more effective than a clever, un-optimized headline. Using “internet trickery,” Willis and other bloggers,

³⁴ Search engines like Google, for example, scan not only headlines, but the first several lines of a story for key words identified by the searcher. This has meant that witty, or clever ledes have also been replaced by more straightforward, keyword-laden openings to stories.

sometimes begrudgingly, use the combination of headline search engine optimization and stories that are known to generate page views to grow their brand.

Good articles that have the potential to gather a diverse audience don't necessarily do that well at the Cult of Hockey, because so much of our traffic is generated from search engines [...] I think the people who succeed aren't necessarily the people who are the best writers, or [produce] the best written pieces. It's the people who are able to create a hook that both attracts readers and that meets the requirements of search engine optimization. So a lot of times we're writing headlines [...] hopefully we avoid it in our stories but lots of times we're writing headlines that take advantage of internet trickery rather than writing headlines that are particularly compelling (January 15, 2014).

Clearly when it comes to navigating the terrain of the Internet, the Cult of Hockey has succeeded. The blog by all accounts is among the Oilogospere's most successful. By tapping into a dedicated and passionate group of readers, along with the recruitment of Internet-savvy writers, the Cult of Hockey looks like a winner in the online media landscape. Staples, for one, believes the future of sports journalism is exemplified by the Cult of Hockey.

There's an appetite for something else and that's been the role of the newspaper, but newspapers are going down in popularity. The paper product has fewer readers, so what's going to be there after the

newspapers are completely electronic and online? It's clearly going to be these blogs (January 10, 2014).

Whether or not Staples' prediction plays out remains to be seen, but what is clear in the case of the Cult of Hockey is that despite its popularity and ability to drive page views, it remains relatively modest in terms of its profitability for the *Journal*. Staples summed this up bluntly, saying:

The economics of the internet aren't great. The page views don't bring the *Journal* much money, so we run the economic side of it and it's a business that makes the *Journal* money, but the salaries that are paid are pretty much what it's worth right now (January 10, 2014).

This is a troubling reality for both bloggers and journalists, as even with the Cult of Hockey's increasing popularity and share of sports readers in Edmonton, the blog is only worth an investment of two freelance writers, who are paid only a fraction of what full-time staff receive, and do not receive other incentives such as benefits.³⁵ With even The Cult of Hockey struggling to bring in online advertising dollars, the forecast for newspapers like the *Edmonton Journal* is gloomy at best.

In a sports media landscape that is increasingly dominated by readers' desire for professional sports coverage, producing unique stories has never been more challenging for journalists. As teams tighten their control of access to players, coaches and managers, traditional media outlets have been subject to more and more 'pack journalism,' which has devalued their access. With

³⁵ Staples is not paid for his work on The Cult of Hockey at the current time. In the past he had been paid a freelance fee to write for the blog above his duties as city hall columnist, but this has since been altered.

journalists now working with virtually the same quotes and teams opting to break stories through their own digital means, what fans are looking for from the media independent of teams and leagues is changing. Now more than ever, opinion and the use of analytics are ways for media members, specifically bloggers, to differentiate their work from others. The Cult of Hockey is one clear example of what has arisen from the trends of decreasing access value, and increasing desire from readers for different types of stories. The blog has successfully exploited the Internet to generate page views, which are now used as a key metric in determining the success of a newspaper's online presence. While the Cult of Hockey has proven highly popular in terms of driving traffic to the *Edmonton Journal*, it has yet to prove highly profitable, only justifying the investment of two freelance salaries. For those who have trumpeted blogs, like the Cult of Hockey, as the future of sports coverage and increased web presence as the answer to the newspaper's current financial crunch, the blog's lack of financial might is a troubling sign that plenty of work remains to find the solution to the industry's financial woes.

Conclusion

Sports journalism is changing rapidly. Together, the trends of convergence, concentration and digitization have all fundamentally impacted what it means to be a newspaper sports journalist in the 21st century and undoubtedly will continue to do so in the years and decades to come, if the industry in its current form lasts that long. Just how much newspaper sports journalism has changed in recent years

became apparent throughout the course of this qualitative case study, as both veteran and young journalists alike shared their experiences in an industry suffering through financial instability and technological upheaval, resulting in a transformation of their institutionalized work routines.

While the research process shed light on the impact of convergence, concentration and digitization on a variety of levels, the most valuable finding surrounds the fundamental shift in the relationship between major-league sport organizations and newspapers in the broader media sports cultural complex (Rowe, 2012). Fundamental changes to the newspaper industry and how major-league sport organizations disseminate their message are challenging the longstanding historical and mutually beneficial relationship between the media and major-league sport. As described in detail, newspapers and major-league sport have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship for well over a century. For major-league sport organizations, the mass media has always served a key role in the creation of fans. Space in print has been viewed as valuable real estate by sport organizations, which are constantly looking to remain in the news. Major-league sport organizations' desire to cultivate fans and spread a message was eagerly met by newspapers, who understood the importance sport could play in attracting a valuable audience commodity of adult males. With both parties benefitting from extensive newspaper coverage of major-league sport, newspaper journalists and their industry as a whole joined sport organizations in the promotion of major-league spectator sport. This close, commercially beneficial relationship, however, has experienced significant change since the rise of digitization. Historically,

sport organizations have never been in a position to shut out the media, nor have they wanted to. In the past, not providing the media with at least some semblance of the information they wanted would have been catastrophic to major-league sport and their own pursuit of fans/audiences. But, with the rise of the Internet and digital media, sport organizations have been empowered to reach audiences in a way that would have been unthinkable only a few decades ago. Major-league teams have embraced the rise of digitization on varying scales. Increasingly, teams employ digital media staff dedicated to providing full coverage of the team and producing content including articles, podcasts and more. Major-league sport organizations are only now starting to fully realize the potential benefits of spreading their own message. Surely the rise of team-generated content and its impact on traditional media will be a growing area of research in the years to come, as an increasing number of teams and leagues work to grow their digital properties and their associated revenue streams.

In response, newspapers are attempting to develop ways to differentiate their content from that produced by teams, heading towards opinion-based and analytical content, specifically in the form of blogs. Despite the rapid growth of major-league sport organizations in developing their own content for digital platforms, newspapers are nonetheless more reliant on sports coverage than ever in the digital era. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, the production of blogs like the Cult of Hockey, and their full integration as a central part of a daily newspaper's sports department, serve as a prime example of newspaper's increasing commitment to major-league sport coverage, even at a

time when teams are growing their own digital content. The impact of newspapers' new major-league sport coverage strategies moving forward will be key to the commercial interests of newspapers, who have relied on the male audience commodity to command advertising dollars for over a century now.

In addition to the rise of team-generated content, newspapers are contending with the rise of non-traditional digital outlets, which are largely unburdened by past relationships with major-league sport and have produced critical content that the official partners in the media sports cultural complex have sometimes neglected. Amateur bloggers are an example of this, and while they will continue to help shape the conversation around teams, leagues and athletes, more powerful online outlets like Deadspin and TMZ are sure to become even more prominent in the future and will likely yield significant attention from sport sociologists seeking to understand their rise to prominence. TMZ, which was born as a Hollywood gossip site in 2005, for instance, has already established itself as a significant player in the online sports scene by breaking some of the biggest sports stories of the last 16 months. TMZ burst onto the digital sports coverage scene in November 2013 with news that Florida State quarterback Jameis Winston was being investigated for sexual abuse. Next came an audio recording of then-Clippers owner Donald Sterling making racist remarks and finally in September of this year, the video of Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice physically abusing his then-fiancée in an Atlantic City hotel elevator. These examples highlight the growing power of non-traditional outlets in the breaking of high profile sports news. TMZ, unlike newspapers, is unburdened by a

commercial reliance on sports organizations to provide access; instead, these digital outlets thrive on their lack of direct connection to major-league sport, working in the tabloid tradition of providing gossip and scandal (Mahler, 2014). Whether or not newspapers can adapt their coverage in the future to compete with digital outlets, which are pushing the envelope by challenging powerful major-league sport organizations, will only become known in the years to come.

In the case of Postmedia, adapting to changes presented by new digital outlets and increased coverage by teams is just one small piece of a complex puzzle of issues, with the end goal still being capturing the digital audience commodity. For the first time in 2013, more money was spent on digital advertising than print, television, and radio, at \$3.5 billion; securing page views and tapping into the digital market will be the single most important measure of success for media outlets moving forward (Ostrikoff, 2014). How Postmedia positions itself in relation to the rise of powerful digital outlets that are unburdened by a historical relationship with major-league sport will be key for the company's financial success in the future. As the company's financial records indicate, it has been struggling to grow advertising revenues across all its digital platforms, at a time when print advertising revenues continue to plummet. As noted earlier, print advertising revenues have steadily declined for Postmedia, as this revenue stream—the chain's primary revenue stream—has fallen from \$674.5 million in 2011 to \$445.5 million in 2013, amounting to a decline of \$229 million over the course of only a few years (Postmedia, 2011; Postmedia, 2013). To counter the loss of print revenue and minimal growth in digital revenues, the

company is poised to further embrace the trend of concentration in an attempt to try and turn their financial fortunes around. Announced on October 6, 2014, Postmedia's proposed purchase of Quebecor's 175 English newspaper holdings—Sun Media—for \$316 million, or roughly one-third of the newspapers' value when they were sold to Quebecor in 1998, will be a defining strategic moment in Postmedia's attempt to attract Canadian advertisers:

[W]e will be able to offer advertisers the opportunity to reach the full scale and scope of their target audiences with a Canadian option for their marketing programs.

Growing our audiences, with the addition of these brands, supports our Postmedia Reimagined strategy and will offer advertisers extended reach for their programs across all platforms (Postmedia memo, 2014).³⁶

Postmedia's attempt to buy Quebecor's English newspaper holdings puts it on the cusp of being the unquestioned king of English print media in the country, with 13 dailies in 9 major markets as well as dailies in the secondary markets of London and Windsor should the deal go through.³⁷ What the further concentration of the Canadian newspaper industry might mean remains to be seen, both in terms of any restructuring Postmedia might undertake after the acquisition, and the long-term success or failure of the new company. There are no shortage of

³⁶ The Reimagined strategy refers to Postmedia's four-platform strategy, which has already launched at the *Ottawa Citizen* and recently launched in Montreal at *The Gazette* and in Calgary at *The Herald*.

³⁷ If approved by the Competition Bureau, Postmedia will operate two dailies in: Vancouver (where they already own and operate the *Sun* and *Province*), Calgary (*Herald* and *Calgary SUN*), Edmonton (*Journal* and *Edmonton SUN*), and Ottawa (*Citizen* and *Ottawa SUN*). In addition to these titles, Postmedia will enter the Winnipeg and Toronto markets with *SUN* titles in both cities.

questions surrounding the Canadian newspaper industry, with the pending purchase of Sun Media by Postmedia being one of the biggest developments for the industry in recent years, with the trend of concentration an increasingly important one in Canadian media. Ultimately the long term success or failure of Postmedia hinges heavily on its bet that the acquisition of Sun Media, and specifically its major digital property CANOE.ca—the chain’s central site online—will provide advertisers with a valuable digital audience commodity that can work to eventually replace the void left by falling print circulation and advertising numbers.

By exploring both convergence and concentration, this thesis has examined two fundamental material shifts to the newspaper industry and their impacts on sports journalists who must negotiate this change on a daily basis. Postmedia, like so many media companies, is focused on providing advertisers with attractive audience commodities built increasingly around size (concentration) and increased productivity and marketability across digital platforms (convergence). Together, digitization, concentration and convergence have meant increased demands on journalists, who are tasked with roles of greater scope due to shrinking staff sizes and the rise of digital content. Ultimately, the changes Postmedia sports journalists have negotiated have resulted in decreased morale and poor labour relations between sports journalists and management. Increased demands brought on as a result of digitization have transformed sports journalists’ work routines and labour practices from being centered on print and the medium’s accompanying deadlines, to a work cycle that is 24/7 in nature and

dominated by the liquidity of content (Karlsson & Stromback, 2010). The job of a sports journalist looks significantly different than it did during the golden age of the 1920s, and as the role continues to evolve to negotiate the upheaval in the newspaper industry, what the work routines and labour practices of the sports journalist will be in the future remains to be seen. Despite this uncertainty, it is likely that regardless of what changes do unfold, the role of the journalist will not fade into the history books, but instead serve an evolved, albeit traditionally important role. As Brock points out in the final pages of *Out of Print*, “[i]f information flows like liquid in and out of devices 24 hours a day, journalism’s value lies in something it has done before: sifting, distilling, taking signal from the noise ” (Brock, 2013, p. 234).

In addition to the changes experienced by sports journalists, industry-wide trends, including the continued alteration of the media sport cultural complex, are likely to only accelerate over the coming years, as new forms of digital technologies force both major-league sport organizations and media outlets alike to adapt. Given the rapid nature of technological advance, there will be no shortage of areas for research in the coming years, as the mutually beneficial and symbiotic relationship between major-league sport and the media continues to be altered by the rapid march of technological development. In addition to this area for further research, the continuing impact of convergence, concentration and digitization on the content produced—in terms of quality, structure and subject matter—will be an area that could yield an array of valuable research. For instance, the place of amateur sport and specifically female sports coverage seems

poised to be pushed further from the mainstream, as media outlets seek to focus an increasing amount of energy on capturing the male audience commodity via major-league sport. Whether or not the digital space, which in its own way has contributed to the decline of amateur sport coverage in the mainstream, fills the gap will be an area of increasing interest moving forward.

In closing, this project sought to contribute to the growing amount of sport sociology and sport journalism literature by adding a unique perspective to a number of conversations surrounding the production of sports journalism, including how the close relationship between major-league sport and the media, as well as the day-to-day work routines and labour practices of sports journalists, are being altered in the digital age. Building on the work of others (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012; Lowes, 1999; McChesney, 1989; Scherer & Jackson, 2008) this study has explored in detail the changing social conditions of labour and codes of knowledge for Postmedia sports journalists in the digital era. Collectively, the three trends of convergence, concentration and digitization have and will continue to fundamentally change the media sport cultural complex, which took decades to form, but is being rewritten at a remarkable pace.

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Appendix A: Profiles of Postmedia newspapers; Sports Reporters (October 2013)

National Post

Average daily circulation: 169,566

Sports reporters employed: 5 (John Lott, Eric Koreen, Sean Fitz-Gerald, Michael Traikos, Bruce Arthur)

The Vancouver Sun

Average daily circulation: 164,507

Sports reporters employed: 6 (Mike Beamish, Brad Ziemer, Scott Brown, Elliott Pap, Gary Kingston, Cam Cole)

The Province

Average daily circulation: 142,300

Sports reporters employed: 7 (Howard Tsumura, Jim Jamieson, Jason Botchford, Lowell Ullrich, Ben Kuzma, Marc Weber, Ed Willes)

The Calgary Herald

Average daily circulation: 127,147

Sports reporters employed: 4 (Vicki Hall, Kristen Odland, Scott Cruickshank, George Johnson)

The Edmonton Journal

Average daily circulation: 101,950

Sports reporters employed: 5 (Jim Mathieson, Joanne Ireland, Chris O'Leary, Curtis Stock, John MacKinnon)

The Leader-Post

Average daily circulation: 41,598

Sports reporters employed: 4 (Ian Hamilton, Murray McCormick, Greg Harder, Rob Vanstone (columnist/editor))

The StarPhoenix

Average daily circulation: 48,107

Sports reporters employed: 3 (Darren Zary, Daniel Nugent-Bowman, Kevin Mitchell (editor))

The Ottawa Citizen

Average daily circulation: 110,019

Sports reporters employed: 5 (Gord Holder, Allen Panzeri, James Gordon, Wayne Scanlan, Martin Cleary)

The Windsor Star

Average daily circulation: 52,169

Sports reporters employed: 4 (Jim Parker, Mary Caton, Bob Duff, Dave Waddell)

The Montreal Gazette

Average daily circulation: 113,888

Sports reporters employed: 6 (Jack Todd, Dave Stubbs, Pat Hickey, Herb Zurkowsky, Randy Phillips, Mike Boone)

Appendix B: Interview Guide

- 1) How long have you been a sports reporter and how long have you been working for the Postmedia chain?
- 2) What made you want to become a sports reporter?
- 3) Have you worked for a smaller news organization in the past (not a large chain like Postmedia) and if so, how does that experience contrast with your current position within Postmedia?
- 4) What was your first sports reporting job at a major daily newspaper and was that experience what you had envisioned it would be?
- 5) Over the length of your career, what have you found to be the most rewarding part of your job and has it changed over the years?
- 6) When you started in the industry, what was the size of your sports department and how did it compare to other sports departments at the time?
- 7) How would you describe the morale within the sports department now compared to earlier in your career? Is there a noticeable difference?
- 8) How has the rise of newspaper websites changed your work routines and labour practices both on an average day and overall?
- 9) In what ways have you attempted to negotiate the new pressures and demands of a digital news cycle?
- 10) What are the keys to assuring your newspaper is able to adapt to the new digital order and what lessons can be learned from the past relating to this adaptation?

- 11) Has the rise of digital copy changed in any fundamental way the type of journalism you are producing?
- 12) Who is driving the changes within your newspaper with respect to digital strategy – upper management, editors, or journalists themselves? Have journalists been consulted in any meaningful way during times of strategic change?
- 13) Has the 24/7 news cycle that has resulted from digitization changed your level of work satisfaction and if so in what ways?
- 14) How have you negotiated the rise of social media, specifically Twitter? Has it been difficult to integrate this along with other digital demands within your work routine?
- 15) What have you found rewarding about working in a newsroom that is increasingly focused on multimedia initiatives?
- 16) Do you believe better journalism is being produced as a result of new technologies?
- 17) Are you in any way discontented with the current state of newspaper journalism, specifically within Postmedia? If so, in what ways?
- 18) From the perspective of a sports reporter, what have been the biggest challenges to producing quality journalism over the last decade?

Appendix C: Information letter and consent form

Study Title: Convergence, concentration and digitization: A case study of the work routines and labour practices of Postmedia sports journalists

Research Investigator:

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Supervisor:

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Background

- You are being asked to participate in this study, because of your role as a sports journalist within the Postmedia newspaper chain
- Your contact information was attained through either your newspaper's contact page, or from industry contacts
- The results of this study will be used in support of my master's thesis

Purpose

- The purpose of this research is to uncover how the trends of digitization, concentration and convergence have impacted the work routines and labour practices of sports journalists. While a great deal of research has been devoted to the changes within the North American newspaper industry over the last decade, little has been done on how widespread industry change has been negotiated by journalists themselves. This gap in the literature is precisely what this research study will seek to address within a sports context.

Study Procedures

- As a participant, you will be part of semi-structured interviews to gain an understanding of your work routines and labour practices, likely over the phone, or in person if possible.
 - Interviews will range from 45 minutes to an hour
 - Participants will likely take part in one, or two interviews
 - All interviews will be recorded for later transcription
 - Transcripts will be sent to participants after the interview process to allow for 'member checking' of the data, to attain respondent validation

Benefits

- This research could be beneficial to journalists, as it will allow them an outlet to discuss how changes to their industry as a whole has impacted how they do their jobs

- The aim of this research is to present findings that will better reflect the day-to-day realities of journalists, providing the public with a better understanding of their work routines and labour practices

Risk

- There are no foreseeable risks to the participant that may arise from their participation in the study.
- There may be risks to being in this study that are not known. If we learn anything during the research that may affect your willingness to continue being in the study, we will tell you right away.

Voluntary Participation

- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. The participation is completely voluntary and you are not obliged to answer any specific questions even if participating in the study.
- Even if you agree to be in the study, you can change your mind and withdraw at any time and any data collected will be removed from the study.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

- Any data collected will be used as part of a master's thesis, with the goal of presenting the findings at a conference shortly after the completion of the study.
- Data will be kept confidential, with only the research investigator and supervisor having access to any data collected.
- Participants will be kept anonymous in order to allow for them to freely share their experiences. Pseudonyms will be used once interviews are transcribed and any identifying information (name of newspaper, co-workers etc.) will be removed.
- All data will be stored in a secure filing cabinet on the campus of the University of Alberta, with only the research investigator and supervisor having access.
- Any interested participants will be supplied with a copy of the research findings once complete.

Further Information

- If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Evan Daum, or Jay Scherer (contact information listed above).
- The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been

answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

Participant's Name (printed) and Signature

Date

Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date