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Reflections on Communication and Sport: On Strategic Communication and Management

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Abstract
In this essay, Paul M. Pedersen provides a personal reflection on communication and sport and examines the area of strategic communication and management. His assessment begins with an overview of the growth and significance of the sport industry and communication’s ubiquitous and influential roles within it. In tracing his scholarly journey, Pedersen comes to see communication as an essential element in the sport industry, whether viewed from individualistic, organizational, or sport-specific perspectives. The focus section in this essay examines research on the Strategic Sport Communication Model (SSCM) and its usefulness in categorizing and operationalizing the field from a strategic management perspective. Using the SSCM as the guide, this reflection provides examples of sport communication research focused on each of the model’s three components. The reflection concludes with an analysis of future research opportunities, particularly opportunities to explore strategic decisions and effectiveness in the sport industry’s use of new/social media. Pedersen concludes that a key to developing best communication practices will be a research agenda that more fully contextualizes strategic communication and management in the sport marketplace.

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Why Communication and Sport Matters

Legendary business executive Jack Welch once coined a word to describe his view of business operations—“boundaryless.” My perspective on the sport industry is similarly boundaryless, encompassing much more than just the high-profile, commercialized professional and amateur sports available on Sky Sports, ESPN Radio, at Yahoo! Sports, or in USATODAY. Having evolved into an enormous and diverse collection of endeavors and businesses, the sport industry is difficult to conceptualize and even harder to define. It is challenging to estimate its size and scope because it encompasses myriad direct, tangential, and wide-ranging components and personnel. For instance, its segments can range from sales, governance, and law, to marketing, event operations, and finance. Stakeholders can be internal “players” like athletes and administrators or external participants like sponsors and journalists. Sporting activities include traditional sports and physical contests plus emerging competitions and more cerebral games. Sites include the football pitch and baseball diamond as well as compliance offices, racetracks, shoe outlets, and various competitive venues. Similarly, sport industry organizations range from local amateur associations and apparel manufacturers to national professional teams and international governing bodies.

A few of my colleagues and some practitioners have attempted to define the sport industry and/or arrive at billion-dollar estimates of its size. These attempts encounter difficulties precisely defining the field and in arriving at an accurate estimate of its monetary value. But it is fair to say that the sport industry’s interrelated segments, stakeholders, activities, sites, and organizations combine to make it an economic juggernaut. Even given the financial upheaval of the past few years, the sport industry has remained a significant economic force throughout the world with sport events, competitions, personnel, promotions, and media coverage proliferating. While there are debatable reasons (e.g., societal, psychological) why the sport industry has such an (arguably) universal significance, one key factor must be communication’s ubiquitous presence and overall importance to its growth and viability. This is particularly true concerning strategic communication and management: the organization, facilitation, administration, and promotion of sport could not be accomplished without it.

Whether one takes an individualistic, organizational, or sport-specific view of strategic communication, it is a fundamental and vital element of the sport industry. For instance, using the analysis of O’Hair, Friedrich, and Dixon (2011), an individualistic view of strategic communication in sport involves the development of written, oral, technological, and other personal skills by sport industry stakeholders to create more effective and strategic communication in business and professional
settings. A bifurcated organizational view of strategic communication in sport involves both sport organizations’ “strategies of organizing” and individuals’ approaches to “communicate strategically” (Conrad & Poole, 2012, p. 12). A sport-specific view of strategic communication proposes that sport public relations is both a marketing and management tool to be integrated throughout the operations and processes of a sport organization (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Branvold, 2012). As with my perspective on the sport industry, my view of strategic communication in sport is quite broad, encompassing the communication activities of sport industry personnel, activities, and organizations. The Strategic Sport Communication Model (SSCM; developed below) explores this notion.

In all of these perspectives, the various elements of strategic communication and management can be seen to impact the sport industry overall and the various sport activities, areas, and personnel in particular. This effect ranges from interpersonal public relations and organizational stakeholder interactions to media rights negotiations and social media promotional initiatives. All components—activity, organization, or individual involved in the sport management and marketing—are affected by communication. Thus, from an economic and strategic point of view, communication and sport matter because they work together to form an influential and pervasive relationship throughout societies and economies. Simply stated, sport cannot exist without communication. At a minimum, every sporting endeavor—whether it be a facility manager’s work on a baseball field, a team vice president’s conundrum over a salary cap issue, or an athlete’s participation in a competitive street luge event—requires intrapersonal communication and often involves interpersonal, organizational, and mediated communication.

My Journey With Communication and Sport

With communication and sport intertwined, impactful, and ubiquitous in society and in the sport industry, they also have influenced my personal development. Communication and sport have permeated many aspects of my life, from early years of sports radio broadcasts and my first sport industry paycheck as a high school public address announcer to later years of educational pursuits and print media work as an agate clerk, stringer, sportswriter, sports business columnist, and author. Communication and sport have underlain my pedagogical and scholarly endeavors in the academy as well. With a practical background in communication, my educational pedigree includes a sport management doctoral emphasis with my dissertation examining the print media coverage of high school athletics. Added to this is an undergraduate degree in business, and graduate degrees in history as well as business communication and public relations; my professorial and scholarly efforts have been situated primarily in sport management programs. Thus, my sport communication pedagogical activities, mentorship endeavors, and scholarly pursuits have been under the umbrella of, or heavily influenced by, the field of sport management. In addition, this background has factored into where I present my research (e.g., Sport
Marketing Association Annual Conference), what associations I join (e.g., North American Society for Sport Management), and where I submit my work (e.g., International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship).

Given this framework and influence, my areas of scholarly interest have been affiliated with the broader view of sport communication and often situated in—or at least influenced by—sport industry management and marketing. My research publications on sport communication platforms (e.g., newspapers and sport magazines), topics (e.g., sexual harassment in sports media), and personnel (e.g., intercollegiate sports information directors) have typically been published in sport management–related academic outlets. These eventually created the impetus to find a journal focused on sport communication.

While continuing to research and publish in sport communication, one of my major thrusts recently has been to mentor the next generation of sport management researchers and professors. Being situated in a program grounded in sport management (with minors in journalism, telecommunications, etc.), my doctoral students’ studies and research in sport communication have been influenced by my broad perspective and approach. Over the years, many of my doctoral students and graduates have examined sport communication topics (e.g., social networking, gendered coverage), sport industry segments (e.g., marketing, sociology), sport settings (e.g., professional leagues, intercollegiate athletics), and media (e.g., online forums, video games) using a variety of theories (e.g., Uses and Gratifications, Social Learning Theory) and methodologies (e.g., experimental design studies, content analyses). Often, because of their educational background and the limited publication outlets for sport communication research, their work is published in sport management (e.g., International Journal of Sport Management) and marketing (e.g., Sport Marketing Quarterly) journals.

**Focus: On Strategic Communication and Management**

As my academic career progressed, there was a growing need for an academic outlet for sport communication research, and I ultimately founded the International Journal of Sport Communication (IJSC). With the help of my editorial board, ad hoc reviewers from myriad backgrounds and disciplines, and academic research contributions from varied fields, the quarterly IJSC is now nearing its sixth year as a prime outlet for all types of scholarly work related to sport communication. While the Journal of Sports Media has a more specific sport communication focus, the IJSC has been the only outlet solely focused on sport communication viewed inclusively. Recently, scholarly research and interest in the field of sport communication have grown to the point where another peer-reviewed outlet—Communication & Sport (C&S), under the guidance of Lawrence Wenner, and associated with the International Association for Communication and Sport (IACS) —was needed, creating more opportunities for researchers to disseminate their sport communication analyses and findings.
Fortunately, *C&S* is also inclusive in its scope and “encourages studies of sport communication and media from broad disciplinary vistas including sport studies/sociology, management, marketing, politics, economics, philosophy, history, education, kinesiology, health, as well as cultural, policy, urban, gender, sexuality, race, and ability studies.” This broad focus is a welcome addition and represents the perspective evidenced in the integration of sport communication as part of sport management, ranging from its curricula to its foundational texts. For instance, “Sport Marketing and Communication” is one of the seven professional component areas within the field’s accreditation standards as produced by the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA). “Communication and the Sport Industry” is one of the chapters within the “Selected Sport Management Functions” section of *Contemporary Sport Management* (Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman, & Thibault, 2011). While *C&S* is unique and certainly does not need my approval, it is personally gratifying that the new journal’s wide net for scholarly input is consistent with my proposed definitions and conceptualizations of the broad field of sport communication.

Drawing upon segmentation methods used in sport marketing and sport industry models used in sport management, some of my work with communication and sport has been in proposing a definition of, and segmentation approach for, the field of sport communication. In this effort, my colleagues and I have taken a more pragmatic and management-focused approach. Our conceptualizations of sport communication are typically much broader and inclusive than what others may endorse. Regardless, our original definition of the field can be found in a sport management and marketing publication where we proposed that “sport communication is a process by which people in sport, in a sport setting, or through a sport endeavour, share symbols as they create meaning through interaction” (Pedersen, Laucella, Miloch, & Fielding, 2007, p. 196).

Around the same time, two colleagues and I developed the SSCM, interrelated with our sport communication definition and first published in *Strategic Sport Communication* (Pedersen, Miloch, & Laucella, 2007). In the SSCM, we illustrate one way in which the field of sport communication could be categorized and operationalized from a strategic management perspective. While communication effects, theories, and processes are all part of our sport communication definition and model, the main thrusts of the model itself are the three strategic components: (a) personal and organizational communication in sport; (b) sport mass media (as well as new/social media); and (c) ancillary sport communication. These three components are interrelated—and thus not mutually exclusive—as sport organizational personnel (e.g., ancillary sport communication involving public relations) must communicate (e.g., personal communication in sport) within a sport setting (e.g., organizational communication in sport) and often with external stakeholders (e.g., sport mass media).

Using the SSCM as the guide for publications of strategic sport communication and management research over the past few years, the following pages provide some
examples of sport communication research published in sport management and marketing journals. As noted in Research Methods and Design in Sport Management, “Research topics are typically derived from the various sport management subdisciplines, then applied to one of the various contexts, or focus areas, of sport” (Andrew, Pedersen, & McEvoy, 2011, p. 4). Under the heading of “Communication and media relations in sport” (p. 4), highlighted as one of the 10 sport management research subdisciplines, several topics are listed such as technology and the media, public relations and strategic management, sport organizations and the media, crisis communication, organizational media, and internal communication. These topics and other published examples noted below serve to illustrate the role sport communication research has played in the practice of—and development of the body of knowledge in—sport management.

SSCM: Personal and Organizational

The first of three SCCM components involves personal and organizational communication in sport. Within this component area are subsections involving intrapersonal, interpersonal, and small-group communication in sport and subsections involving intraorganizational and interorganizational communication in sport. Concerning sport management and marketing research affiliated with this first component, examples of key publications across the component sections are given. The one area where work is lacking is personal communication in sport. Some notable exceptions are found in the Journal of Sport Management (JSM). For instance, Armstrong (2000) uses an experimental design to examine information processing and persuasive communication in a sport setting. Also, McGinnis and Gentry (2006) examine interviews and transcripts to determine interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural constraints facing female golfers.

While research covering personal communication in sport is lacking in the sport management literature, scholars have frequently researched in organizational communication in and through sport. For instance, a team’s communication with its stakeholders has an impact on the success of the sport organization, which is why Walker, Kent, and Vincent (2010) examined professional sports franchises’ newsletters to determine their corporate social responsibility practices’ communication strategies. Intraorganizational communication was investigated by O’Reilly and Knight (2007) using the concept of knowledge management to assess how information is created, used, organized, and shared in a sport organizational context. Battenfield and Kent (2007) examined verbal communication, rituals, nonverbal communication, artifacts, and other aspects of communication in their investigation of the culture of communication in a sports information department. Other examples include sport industry employment topics pertaining to organizational issues such as referent comparison, job satisfaction, gender makeup and coverage trends, and sexual harassment of sport communication professionals (e.g., Pedersen, Osborne,
Whisenant, & Lim, 2009; Pedersen, Whisenant, & Schneider, 2003; Whisenant, Pedersen, & Smucker, 2004).

**SSCM: Ancillary Aspects**

Another SSCM component involves ancillary aspects of sport communication, including sport public relations, advertising in and through sport, media relations, community relations, crisis communication, and practical and theoretical research in sport communication. There has been plentiful sport management and marketing research in these areas, with a majority of the publications focused on strategic communication issues involving media/public relations and marketing. For instance, Judson, Neeley, and Aurand (2011) studied communication opportunities and branding in intercollegiate athletics; Stoldt, Ratzlaff, and Remolet (2009) applied a public relations theoretical model to a sport facility funding campaign. McKelvey and Grady (2008) examined public relations strategies and contractual language issues in their study of ambush marketing and sponsorship program protection at sporting events.

Two journals have often published research pertaining to this component of the model. The *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing* (IJSMM) publishes sport communication–related research, at one point devoting an entire issue to the topic. Many of the articles in that special issue fit into the model component called ancillary areas of sport communication dealing with such topics as sport media relations, sport media discourse, and sponsorship and marketing. For instance, Whisenant and Mullane (2007) investigated sports information directors through the lens of homologous reproduction. Harris and Clayton (2007) looked into the nationalistic and masculine representations in professional soccer, and Schimmel, Clark, Irwin, and Lachowetz (2007) researched the marketing communication audit in event management, an assessment that sport organizations can use to increase the effectiveness of their marketing communication strategies. Sport communication research affiliated with this SSCM component is also frequently disseminated in *SMQ*. The journal has published a broad variety of communication and sport articles over the years. However, to assist sport industry professionals in their quest to make their marketing strategies more effective, recent examples include content analytic research on the sport celebrity endorsers featured in *Sports Illustrated* (Ruizley, Runyan, & Lear, 2010) and psychographic analysis work by Dwyer, Shapiro, and Drayer (2011) seeking to determine fans’ consumption differences across media platforms.

**SSCM: Sport Mass Media**

The sport mass media component of the model is quite broad, including everything from the traditional media (e.g., newspapers, radio, television, publishing, movies) to emerging media (e.g., new media, social media). This component of the model
has, arguably, received the most scholarly attention by sport management and marketing scholars. In fact, JSM—what many consider the leading academic outlet in the sport management field—devoted an entire special issue to sport media research. Wenner (2004) edited this special issue and his opening piece—a cultural, sociological, and political analysis of a controversial televised Super Bowl halftime show—involved elements of crisis communication, promotional communication, and organizational communication in mass-mediated sport. In addition to Wenner’s introduction, the special issue included sport media topics ranging from ratings and scheduling in the broadcasting of professional football (Fortunato, 2004) to the portrayal and marketing of females in sport and fitness magazines aimed at female audiences (Lynn, Hardin, & Walsdorf, 2004). Beyond that special issue, many sport management and marketing scholars have touched on the traditional media in their research.

Even sport management outlets such as the International Journal of Sport Finance (IJSF) publish sport communication articles, beginning with a sport media article in the journal’s inaugural issue. Recent topics in the IJSF have been sports broadcasting rights fees (e.g., Peeters, 2011) and television viewership activities (e.g., Alavy, Gaskell, Leach, & Szymanski, 2010). A few recent examples in sport management periodicals are examinations of sporting event pay-per-view audience demands (Watanabe, 2012), the consumption of televised sports in central viewing locations such as theaters (Fairley & Tyler, 2012), interorganizational relationships and emerging sports broadcasting technologies (Turner & Shilbury, 2010), sports journalists and mass-mediated identity (Jun & Lee, 2012), print media coverage of athletes (e.g., Eagleman, 2011), and sports radio broadcasters (Sosa & McCabe, 2010). Overall, while the traditional print and broadcast media have received the most scholarly attention in terms of published sport management research in academic journals, the sport communication area involving new and social media has grown significantly recently. This has particularly been the case with research published in the IJSC and will probably continue with other sport-related scholarly outlets, including C&S. The growing body of knowledge in new and social sport media research is examined below.

Looking Ahead for Communication and Sport Research

With the arrival of C&S, the research in communication and sport will flourish even more. C&S’s mission is broad and sport communication research with a more management-marketing focus will surely find a home there occasionally. But such research will continue to be published in other scholarly journals covering sport communication (e.g., IJSC), sport marketing (e.g., SMQ), and sport management (e.g., JSM). As noted earlier, communication’s influence on the sport industry as a whole—and the management and marketing of the industry in particular—is significant, and sport scholars are increasingly aware of its impact on the field. More research will be published examining communication’s involvement in the strategy,
management, and marketing of sport organizations, and the stakeholders in the sport industry. While standard quantitative and qualitative approaches will continue to be used and areas of traditional sport communication research will continue to be explored, the area that is receiving increased attention is new/social media within the sport industry. This evolving segment of sport communication impacts all sport organizations, influences their various functions, and demands the attention of most internal and external sport industry stakeholders.

Within the information and communication technologies (ICTs) area of strategic organizational communication (Conrad & Poole, 2012), scholars across sport management, marketing, and communication have already published many important studies involving new/social media. For instance, in 2011 an “emerging technology” sport marketing special issue of the *IJSMM* contained eight new/social media articles with topics ranging from how a professional league uses YouTube to the use of eye-tracking technology to investigate a sport website and its e-commerce effectiveness. In addition, other recently published ICT research has focused on organizational policy (e.g., Sanderson, 2011), sport facilities and communication technologies (e.g., Seifried, 2011), sustainability communication (e.g., Ciletti, Lanasa, Ramos, Luchs, & Lou, 2010), information management (e.g., Scholl & Carlson, 2012), social networks (e.g., Hambrick, 2012), event management (e.g., Schoenstedt & Reau, 2010), strategic communication (e.g., Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011), brand management (e.g., Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011), media personnel (e.g., Sheffer & Schultz, 2010), Internet blogs as alternative media sports coverage outlets (e.g., Clavio & Eagleman, 2011), sports information and public relations (e.g., McCarthy, 2011; Sanderson, 2010), marketing (e.g., Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Lee, Cheon, Judge, Sin, & Kim, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010; Suh & Pedersen, 2010; Williams & Chinn, 2010), and investigations about social media user and follower interactions (e.g., Clavio & Kian, 2010; Frederick, Clavio, Burch, & Zimmerman, 2012; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). As we move forward, it will be important for diverse scholars to join in exploring this increasingly important area.

Much early research in this area has relied on content analysis to take snapshots of social media and sport. A few studies have examined audience consumption and effects. Future research, framed by a strategic communication perspective, needs to examine organizational strategies, applications, and market effectiveness in using new/social media. Although this suggestion is for new/social media scholars, it follows Wenner’s (2006) broader observation that our content and audience-based research will be enriched as scholars “prioritize getting access to sport organizations and to media organizations as they fashion their sport-centered product” (p. 57). In the new/social media research area involving strategic communication, there are many such opportunities. For instance, sport communication scholars should investigate whether and how sport organizations are being strategic in their new/social media activities and their integration with public relations, marketing endeavors, media relations, community relations, and business operations. How sport
stakeholders are measuring the effectiveness and return on investment from new/social media endeavors should be examined. Applying a strategic communication perspective to studying ICTs and new/social sport media research can accompany other approaches for exploring communication in the sport marketplace. Given the significance of the sport industry, the need to investigate and adopt best practices in sport management, and the necessity to build a body of knowledge in this area, the field is truly wide open for theoretical and pragmatic research on strategic communication in sport.

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