1 INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNICATION AND SPORT

It's one of the most popular platitudes in sport: sport is a microcosm of society. It's an easily defendable position. However, it's just as defendable to argue in the inverse: society is a microcosm of sport. There is a yin and yang relationship inherent in how sports unfold within and around virtually every culture to the point that one could argue an even grander platitude: society is *immersed* in sports. Even if one is not an eager participant or fan of anything related to athletic competitions, they still cannot help but to be touched by them in some manner.

Other forms of leisure unfold in ways that allow a nonparticipant an exit from the influence. Not into video games? Don't download them. Not into movies? Don't stream them. People can largely divorce themselves from other leisure activities without feeling beholden to those who are enthusiasts—except for sport. Try going to a shopping center downtown when an athletic event is being hosted, and you'll encounter a dramatically increased commute time—and, perhaps, a charge for what is otherwise a free parking space. Try scheduling your community picnic during the Super Bowl, and you'll lament the poor turnout. If a college student wants to visit with former high school classmates, the best time to find them back is the week of the homecoming game, whether you care about the event itself or not. Churches recruit new members with softball and basketball leagues. Advertisers plan campaigns around it because it's one programming in which viewers won't skip commercials. Presidential candidates coordinate events around it to show universal appeal and identify with voters. Former ESPN President George Bodenheimer was selling the fledgling network to local markets in the 1980s and had tremendous success. Why? Every town indicated they were a "sports town."

If asked to imagine a world without sports, we received a glimpse of it during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. If sports were a drug, then many experienced symptoms of withdrawal in the months when the world largely shut down. People tuned in to watch anything that could even resemble sporting competition: ESPN aired basketball players playing horse from their own parking lots and private gyms, and elaborate "bubbles" were created to allow teams to compete in front of cardboard cutouts of fans and virtual screens. Could a team play 11 doubleheader baseball games—and 38 games total—in a span of 27 days? In 2019, that would have been viewed as preposterous; in 2020, the St. Louis Cardinals did precisely that. The adjustments and accommodations were seemingly limitless to keep the sports show (and revenues) rolling. Could the French Open tennis tournament occur in October and the Masters golf tournament occur in November—in the middle of football season? They sure could if the alternative was no French Open or Masters tournament at all. Sports mattered *that* much.

Green Bay Packers House

By Corey Coyle. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Green_B ay_Packers_House_-_panoramio.jpg, licensed under CC BY 3.0 (http s://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

It is tempting to conclude that the pandemic "changed everything" and therefore use it as a framework for every discussion in this book, but the facts indicate that most aspects of sports moved back to equilibrium soon after. Sports journalists returned to in-person press conferences, for example, and schedules reverted to normal patterns. Thus, instead of "changing everything," the pandemic "revealed everything"—some things communication and sport scholars had established for years and other things we merely suspected about sport in the American ecosystem. The largest lesson appeared to be that the impact of sport-based culture is inescapable in modern American life.

Youth sports, for example, are among the most common activities for children in the United States. The Aspen Institute (2019) reports that nearly 72 percent of children between the ages of 6 and 12 play an individual or team sport. While these numbers provide us with some appreciation for the extent to which sports are important, they cannot fully describe the range of sports in which young people participate or the ways children play sports informally. Sports are also significant because they provide models of leadership and perseverance for young people, environments to develop interpersonal and conflict resolution skills, and stories of inspiration when children use sports to develop their individual skills and character. All of which is to say that *communication* is central to how we play, watch, interpret, and evaluate sports.

Indiana University Soccer Fans

By Rdikeman at the English-language Wikipedia. https://commons. wikimedia.org/wiki/File:College_soccer_fans_indiana_2004.jpg, licensed under CC BY 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/ by-sa/3.0/deed.en)

Of course, youth sports beget other forms of sport. A quick glance at your college classmates offers an appropriate example. How many of them wear a sweatshirt or hat that features their favorite team? Perhaps your own wardrobe has these articles of clothing? When you wear a collegiate sweatshirt, are you affiliating with an academic or athletic program? Both? Indeed, a positive affiliation with sports is one way that college students construct and communicate identity. Many students even choose where to attend college based on a campus culture organized around sports (Sperber, 2000). And, as the ESPN advertising campaign

called "Never Graduate" illustrates, many of us maintain our allegiances to the colleges we attended. Using familiar rivalries such as Michigan–Ohio State or North Carolina–Duke, the ESPN commercials depicted adults who continue to be loyal to their undergraduate institutions. At the heart of the campaign was the idea that our college affiliation—*understood primarily as a sports affiliation*—communicates something essential about our identity. As much as it may be warranted, no university is likely to receive a parade when its business school moves into the top 10 of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings.

The stakes for understanding communicative practices may be even greater at the professional level. Especially because professional sports are inextricably linked to the media that broadcast, report, and opine about the games, it is next to impossible to escape the influence of professional sports. Consider that leagues such as the Women's National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Basketball Tournament and the National Football League (NFL) routinely set attendance records, the expansion of digital services makes consuming live sporting events more available through satellite providers and Internet feeds, and television networks continue to invest billions of dollars in sports broadcasting contracts. Or, think about the fact that sports targeting older demographics such as pickleball have exploded in popularity, fantasy sports have produced an entire industry that is dependent on (but also separate from) sport itself, community officials often insist that the key to urban development or city pride is to invest in a professional sports franchise and/or arena, and player salaries continue to rise, often driving up the cost of attendance in the process. There are many other ways our lives are affected by professional sports' popularity. What is critical, once again, is that communication practices are essential to the success of sports—from expressions of collective identity found at live events, to the images produced by sports media, to the importance granted to sports in the vitality of a community.

Across all levels of competition, and through the media that cover these events, the very language of sport has become commonplace in American culture. As early as 1959, when Tannenbaum and Noah coined the phrase "sportsugese," there has been an acknowledgment that sport influences how we think and talk. Inspired both by his experience as a sportswriter and the prevalence of sport language in the speeches of President Richard Nixon, Robert Lipsyte (1975) termed this phenomenon "sportspeak." Indeed, as Segrave (2000) has pointed out, sport metaphors are commonly used to communicate ideas and feelings about politics, war, business, and sex. For instance, during the 2008 presidential campaign, both Democrat John Edwards and Republican Mike Huckabee compared themselves to the racehorse, Seabiscuit, as both wished to embody similar qualities of determination characterizing the 1930s thoroughbred. During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, General Norman Schwarzkopf famously referred to a military strategy as a "Hail Mary pass," a familiar football reference. Meanwhile, business meetings are routinely punctuated with platitudes such as "this ad campaign is a slam dunk." As for sex, American adolescence is commonly described through the quest to "get to first base" or "hit a home run." Sports media professionals, especially announcers, also regularly feature these metaphors and clichés. This is especially the case when announcers are under a great deal of pressure or when the action on the field or court is not following expected patterns (Wanta & Leggert, 1988).

While language use is one indicator of sport's prominent role in American culture, another is the fact that it is among the largest industries in the United States. The North American sports market was worth $83 billion entering 2023 (Gough, 2022). These revenues, coming from

Military Flyover at the Rose Bowl

By Van Ha. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

ticket sales, media rights, sponsorships, and merchandising, have remained steady or grown even as the worldwide economy has struggled. Meanwhile, we should point out that sport's ability to generate media interest is almost unparalleled. The two most watched television events in the world are routinely international sporting events—the Olympics and the men's World Cup in soccer (Tomlinson, 2005). With that popularity, television networks eagerly pay astronomical sums for the rights to broadcast sports. In 2010, for example, CBS and Turner Sports paid the NCAA $10.8 billion for a 14-year contract to broadcast the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament (O'Toole, 2010). In 2016, the contract was extended to 2032 for an additional $8.8 billion (Norlander, 2016). For the right to broadcast the Olympic Games from 2021 to 2032, NBC paid the International Olympic Committee nearly $7.75 billion (Armour, 2014). All of this demonstrates that the immense popularity generated by sports makes them among the most desirable commodities in the media industry.

COMMUNICATION AND SPORT

What should be clear by now is that we are interested in sports primarily as phenomena of *communication*. The academic field of "communication" or "communication studies" traditionally covers a range of interests including, but not limited to, intercultural, interpersonal, mediated, organizational, and rhetorical. Other academic publications and textbooks have studied sports through other perspectives. Indeed, the disciplines of anthropology, history, kinesiology, psychology, and sociology have contributed greatly to our understanding of how and why people participate in sports. However, these disciplines tend to do so without emphasizing the communicative practices that precede and frame the ways people participate in sport. Communication scholars, meanwhile, focus specifically on symbols, messages, and meaning. For example, Kassing and colleagues (2004) suggest that people enact, produce, consume, and

organize sport primarily as a communicative activity. Wenner (2015) further organizes these commitments into three "dispositions": "media, sports, and society," "sport communication as a profession," and "communication studies and sport." Following these leads, our focus in this text is to explore how and why sport can be understood and studied specifically from the perspective of communication, a field with a far-ranging set of interests and applications.

This is not to suggest that the field of communication hasn't benefited from other academic disciplines. Sociology, in fact, is likely the academic field that has done the most to promote the serious study of sports. In 1978, the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport was founded, leading to the publication of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* (*SSJ*). Just a few years later, scholar Richard Lapchick founded the Center for the Study of Sport in Society, then housed at Boston's Northeastern University. This led to the publication of the *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, which alongside *SSJ* publishes the leading scholarship on the sociology of sport. Meanwhile, other academic fields cultivated the study of sport through publications such as the *Journal of Sport Behavior*, the *Journal of Sport Management*, and *Sport in History*.

The field of communication developed its interest in sport around the same time period. In 1975, Michael Real published a study of the Super Bowl, called "Super Bowl: Mythic Spectacle." In that article, Real explained that the televised broadcast of the Super Bowl was arranged to emphasize the mythology of football as a ritualized expression of American identity. That sport could be used to communicate—and thus, affirm and extend—American values became one of the early themes of communication and sport scholarship. Other early studies in mass communication confirmed the importance of sports. Trujillo and Ekdom (1985), for example, analyzed sportswriters' accounts of the 1984 Chicago Cubs to reveal how journalism is a means by which "American cultural values are displayed, affirmed and integrated" (p. 264). Meanwhile,

Farrell (1989) recognized that the mediated production of the Olympic Games used international politics to create dramatic narratives that fostered national identity. By the time that Wenner's *Media, Sports, & Society* was published in 1989, it was clear that there was much to be gained through the communicative study of sport. These early studies were significant not only because they demonstrated the significance of sport but also because they blurred the traditional divisions of communication scholarship, therefore making the study of communication and sport a truly interdisciplinary endeavor.

The relationship between communication and sport further developed in the 1990s with studies featuring an increasingly diverse set of topics and scholarly methods. As Trujillo (2003) notes, "[D]uring the 1990s, communication students and scholars became very serious about studying sport" (p. xiii). This attitude stood in contrast to previous decades, during which many academics dismissed
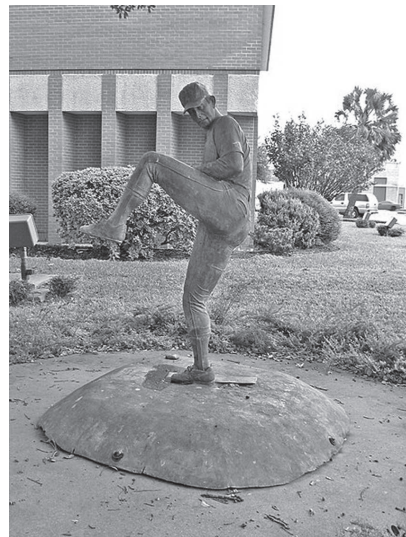
Nolan Ryan Statue in Alvin, Texas

the study of sport as being trivial, much like the traditional view in news media that ridiculed the sports page as a "toy department" (Rowe, 2007). By the turn of the century, this seriousness prompted a robust interest in communication and sport that now cuts across virtually every area of inquiry in the discipline. Throughout the 2000s, communication scholars found new avenues for engaging in sport-based research, resulting in numerous conferences and publications, including several special issues of communication journals dedicated exclusively to sport. Such growth leads us to the contemporary moment in which the "field of sport communication now has its own coherent body of knowledge and a community of scholars who are advancing the field" (Abeza et al., 2014, p. 308). This book, therefore, is an effort to synthesize that knowledge and offer a comprehensive survey of the field.

Before we proceed, we should note that this text is not a handbook for practitioners. We know that many of you are interested in careers in "sports communication," perhaps working in sports broadcasting, for the marketing department for a sports franchise, or in communications at a university athletic department. We make relevant connections to these professional interests throughout this text. However, primarily we take up how communication and sport can be studied and what they can tell us about one another. The emphasis on *study* over *practice*, therefore, is the logic by which we have chosen to feature the phrase "communication and sport" over "sports communication." We also contend that this focus on study over practice can, incidentally, make you a potentially better practioner as well. With this distinction in mind, but before we offer an overview of the material covered in this book, let us turn our attention to some matters of definition.

Communication

It is virtually impossible to find a definition of "communication" that everyone can agree upon. If you have taken a public speaking course or an introduction to communication theory, you've likely encountered some of the more common definitions of the term. These definitions involve key concepts such as "sender," "message," and "receiver," all of which emerged from telecommunications research in the 1940s (Shannon & Weaver, 1948). Communication scholars have used these simple concepts to develop increasingly sophisticated models of communicative practices. Today, communication is largely understood as a process, wherein meaning is constructed and exchanged through a variety of symbols and media. Thinking of communication as a *process* instead of a *product* allows researchers to examine more than the content of the "message" or the intention of the "sender." Instead, scholarship may examine message construction, interpersonal influence, small group dynamics, mass media, rhetoric and persuasion, and the performance of identity. Accordingly, in this book we adopt a broad and inclusive approach to communication, recognizing that different definitions and methods allow for greater understanding. Thus, if there is any single definition we would endorse, it is one in the spirit of Alberts and colleagues (2012), who define communication as "a transactional process in which people generate meaning through the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages in specific contexts, influenced by individual and societal forces and embedded in culture" (p. 20).

Communication is a broad discipline. As we noted earlier, communication scholars study areas such as intercultural, interpersonal, mediated, organizational, and rhetorical phenomena. Each of

these labels is insufficient on its own, however, as there are various subfields of interest. An interest in interpersonal communication, for example, might include studies of family relationships, friendships, romantic relationships, or workplace interactions. Mediated communication, meanwhile, encompasses studies of audiences, industries, and productions across an array of forms, including print media, television, and "new media" (which often refers to the Internet, social media, user-generated media, or some combination). In fact, our very understanding of "media" has changed with these technological innovations, as we now regularly integrate broadcast, streaming, and social media in our sport experiences. Another way to think about communication research is to focus less on the means of communication and more on the contexts. From this view, we might think about topical interests in areas such as environmental communication, health communication, or, yes, communication and sport. It is also important to note that oftentimes these areas and topics of interest interact and overlap, truly reminding us that "communication" is a fluid term.

In addition to the range of topics, communication scholars conduct research from different intellectual traditions, namely social scientific, humanistic, and critical. *Social scientific* scholars are those who value objective studies of observable communication behaviors. Their research seeks to test, predict, and generalize communication phenomena, typically through quantitative forms of analysis. *Humanistic* scholars take a more subjective view of communication, using qualitative forms of analysis to explain particular (as opposed to general) examples as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of how and why people communicate as they do. *Critical* (or critical/cultural) scholars prioritize ideologies and power as influences on communication practices. They view both human behavior and scholarship as unavoidably political, using scholarship as a means to facilitate positive social change. Between the three of us as authors, we have expertise across these orientations to communication research. Our approach in this book is therefore inclusive, as we survey broadly the topical and methodological issues addressed by communication scholars of sport.

Sport

If it is important that we have a shared basis for understanding of the term "communication," then it is equally important to define "sport." You may have noticed by now that although the word "sports" is used in the opening pages of this book, we have chosen "sport" for the title. Before we explain this distinction, let us first settle on what makes something a sport in the first place. Guttmann's *From Ritual to Record* (1978) is written in the sociological tradition of sport scholarship. Nevertheless, it provides a typology that helps define and delimit the scope of sport. Guttmann wants to distinguish between four levels of activity: play,

Indonesian Child With Tattered Ball

By Jonathan McIntosh. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jakarta_old_football.jpg, licensed under CC BY 2.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

games, contests, and sports. Play, he suggests, is "nonutilitarian physical or intellectual activity pursued for its own sake" (p. 3). When that play becomes organized, we have "games," and when games have winners and losers, we have "contests." Not all contests are games, however. As Guttmann notes, a war is a contest with winners and losers, but it is most certainly not a game.

Are all contests sports, then? Guttmann doesn't think so. For example, he notes that just because *Sports Illustrated* writes about it, it doesn't mean chess is a sport. Nearly 50 years later, we could amend this to say that just because ESPN televises it, it doesn't mean the spelling bee, poker, or cornhole is a sport. What is required, Guttmann (1978) claims, is that sports involve a *physical* component. Therefore, sports are defined as "'playful' physical contests, that is, as nonutilitarian contests which include an important measure of physical as well as intellectual skill" (p. 7). Following this definition, when we talk of specific contests such as basketball or golf, we will likely use the term "sports." However, and much more frequently, when we refer to the institutional arrangement of leagues, teams, officials, players, fans, and media, we will use the term "sport." In similar terms, we might also think of Bell's (1987) definition, which states, "Sport is a repeatable, regulated, physical contest producing a clear winner" (p. 2). While we can quibble a bit on the ability to produce that winner when there's such thing as a tie or draw in many key sports, the intent of winning is inevitably present nonetheless, making this a worthy set of criterion for discussion.

PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

This book builds on the foundation we have detailed previously and now, in its fifth iteration, it is reshaped to reflect the latest in the sports landscape. Times have shifted the terrain substantially since this book was first advanced in 2012. Imagine the first edition, when streaming wasn't really a factor, sports gambling was illegal outside of one state, college athletes did not receive sponsorship deals, and sports fans were just figuring out what a tweet was. Moreover, there was so much less scholarship to include back then as compared to what we have now. We adapted our structure over the previous editions, but these shifts eventually would require a whole-bore reconceptualization. That is what you see here. We added a new third author, Dr. Nicky Lewis, to help us broaden our lens with crucial expertise in some of these new areas. We then cast a broad net in the effort to survey the field of communication and sport across its methodological, theoretical, and topical diversity. Here is an overview of the chapters that follow.

We offer this edition of the book in four units, and you're nearly halfway done with Unit I, Foundations of Sports Communication. This short, two-chapter unit consists of the present introductory chapter (Chapter 1) along with a new chapter, Chapter 2, focusing on Theoretical Approaches to Communication and Sport. Whereas we previously only engaged directly with our "theoretically speaking" inserts, this chapter provides a much more direct, deeper dive into the core theories that are most frequently employed for the study of communication phenomena. Whether focusing on the production, creation, or consumption of sports media messages, the theoretical underpinnings provide a good start for understanding the core premise of our book: there's a ton to learn in sports communication once you realize that sport is rarely just about sport.

Unit II then focuses on the Community of Sport, which we now organize from the micro to the macro. Chapter 3 focuses on the Interpersonal Interactions embedded in the practice

and discussion of sport phenomena. From parent–child to athlete–coach communication, the chapter focuses on how one individual interacts with another as key players in how we navigate a game, broadcast, or activist post within the sports world. Next, we move to Small Group and Team Interactions in Chapter 4, where communication dyads are complicated by introducing clusters of participants, often with different needs, stances, and goals. Consider the huddle that is frequently formed in many team sports, and note how the role of the coach is different than the players within it—or from those on the outside looking in—and you'll get a sense of what terrain Chapter 4 is covering. The final two chapters within this second unit turn to the media, often the most-frequent way anyone interacts in the sports world. First, Chapter 5 focuses on Legacy Media Interactions, some of which have diminished to a large degree (such as radio), some of which have transitioned to much of their work to online spaces (such as newspapers and magazines), and some of which are still highly consumed but in dramatically different digitally-streamed ways (such as television). These entities are then both complemented and supplemented by the phenomena in Chapter 6, which focuses on Social and User-Generated Media Interactions. Americans now spend several hours a day on such platforms, each with different interfaces and gratifications obtained, from TikTok to Instagram, YouTube to blogs, and everything in between. Overall, Unit II shows how sport can be an intimate, paired interaction (such as two individuals dueling on a tennis court), or it can be a massive, nation-stopping event, such as what happens every February for the Super Bowl. Regardless of the type of interaction from the micro to the macro, Unit II shows how all of these communicative exchanges are meaningful to the participants as well as to the observers watching from the outside.

Our most robust unit comes next, as Unit III pertains to the Representation and Enactment of Sport. For anyone who has previously consulted earlier editions of this text, the new structure is likely jarring, leading to questions such as "where is the chapter on gender—or on race and ethnicity?" Not to worry, as those issues feature widely in this unit but are embedded in larger communicative practices that inform them. The first two chapters focus on how stories are told (Chapter 7, Sports Storytelling) and ultimately retold (Chapter 8, Sport and Mythology). Each side of this equation is important, yet is also embedded in a similar notion that sports are built upon so many rules and structures that we typically rely on others (whether a parent, a TV broadcast, or an X account) to help us understand them. Issues of identity are at the nexus of the next two chapters, separating out manifestations of identity (Chapter 9, Media Representations of Sports Identity) from displays of that identity (Chapter 10, Performance of Sports Identity). Both chapters cover issues such as gender, race, or sexual orientation, but do so in different manners as the former emphasizes the messages we received about identity and the latter pertains to how that alters how we see ourselves and others as people sometimes within and sometimes outside of what constitutes a dominant frame or societal expectation. Finally, the last two chapters in Unit III separate out a chapter that previously combined politics and nationalism. In Chapter 11, Sport and Politics takes center stage, including more direct ways that activism and social justice have both been a part of American sports history while also have received amplified attention in the past decade, ranging from Colin Kaepernick's stance to Black Lives Matter demonstrations. Then, Chapter 12 turns to Sport and National Identity, specifically how sports are used to create "imagined communities" of us vs. them, which are then sometimes used for nation branding and other elements of public relations and persuasion.

Finally, this text concludes with three chapters that collectively form Unit IV, the Implications of Sports Communication on Society. First, Chapter 13 relays how Commercialism and Sport dominates many of the other interactions and decisions previously discussed in the text. Legendary sports broadcaster Don Ohlmeyer once argued that if you ever wonder why something happens in sports, the answer is always money. Chapter 13 reveals how the true answer is a combination of money, power, and access. Next, Reputation and Crisis Management moves to the forefront in Chapter 14, which typically offers an interesting cocktail of rhetorical and public relations aims. There is considerable cognitive dissonance one feels when an athlete transgresses, or a team makes an unethical decision, and this chapter reveals the strategies that are often employed when such reputational crises occur—some to positive effects and some far from it. Finally, Chapter 15 focuses on Sports Gaming, a chapter we've dedicated to this text in previous editions. Still, this is again one of the most changed because of developments of the modern era, including the rise of sports gambling, the continued mainstreaming of esport, and the key sports media driver that is fantasy sports. In all, these concluding chapters show how there are often games within the games that are worthy of analysis and understanding.

CONCLUSION

It should be evident that the relationship between communication and sport is one that requires multiple approaches. The chapters in this book are as comprehensive an overview as is available. Yet, we understand that additional topics and questions could be raised. It is our hope that the following chapters provoke you to consider how we might best understand communication and sport. Each chapter incorporates numerous examples and definitions of key terms. We also include four features found throughout the book: an interview with either a communication and sport scholar or a practitioner with experience in sports media; an example that provokes discussion about the role of ethics in communication and sport; a representative case study that demonstrates the central concepts introduced in the chapter; and a "theoretically speaking" box that expands on a given academic concept.

We close this introduction with one final observation about our approach in this book. We are scholars and critics of sport, yes, but we also are fans. We have strong allegiances to our teams, from the Green Bay Packers to the Chicago Cubs to the Indiana University Hoosiers, no matter how mightily any of those teams may struggle. We played sports as kids, continue to play as adults, and are committed to supporting the athletic activities of our children. And, yes, we even participate in fantasy sports. In short, we are invested in the community of communication and sport in multiple ways. Throughout this book, we hope you will join us.

2 THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATION AND SPORT

Think back to some of your earliest memories—maybe it was going to your neighborhood pool and playground, or winning a of game freeze tag at a friend's birthday party, or going out to recess in primary school. For many of us, we learned how to play before we could even speak. Games of peek-a-boo and shaking objects such as teething rings came to us before we could vocalize to our caregivers. Before long, attempts at play evolved into competition (the "terrible twos" are a notorious time for this). Physical ability, competitive interest, and emotional investment all grow rapidly in early childhood. By the time we left our toddler years behind, we had all the building blocks necessary to understand, enjoy, and play games—which set the foundation for participation in formal sport.

For some of us, our human inclination for play and games would not extend into the competitive sports domain. For others—and perhaps most of you reading this book—sports have become part of your daily life. This lived experience, where sports are played, shared, and consumed, is facilitated by communication. We smiled and giggled as infants playing peek-a-boo through nonverbal communication. Then, we learned and repeated the rules of childhood games through verbal communication. Finally, as physical, competitive, and emotional proclivities increased, most of us participated and widely consumed sports through organizational and media communication. Because many of these events are universal, we can examine them analytically and critically using a theoretical lens. This helps us better understand the way sports function in our daily lives.

We know sport matters. And sport involves meaningful interactions that occur through communication at the individual, group, organizational, and societal level. Here, you will become familiar with the core theoretical approaches that have firmly anchored sport in the communication domain. We start with a working definition of communication theory, which allows us to examine sport through the *process* of communication.

COMMUNICATION THEORY DEFINED

It may be surprising to hear that you use communication theories all of the time. They come to us as lay theories; passed down to us as lessons learned from our caregivers, acquired from our real-world experiences, and generally help us explain things that happen in everyday life. Examples of lay theories about communication include: "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all," and "honesty is the best policy." Many of us heard these sayings as

children. Learning to communicate kindly and honestly has clear benefits for earning respect and building trust among our families, friends, and community members. Gossiping behind someone's back and being untruthful can both have negative consequences. While both of these lay theories are helpful in understanding the effects of certain types of communication in our daily lives, thinking about communication theory (in a scholarly sense) is much less common.

Remember from Chapter 1 that communication is a process by which meaning is generated (Alberts et al., 2012). Theories give us a wider, more abstract understanding of that process. When we think about theory in a scholarly way, we are systematically organizing individual events into a larger category. Often, we want to do this so that we can make assumptions and predictions about future events. This does not mean that you shouldn't use scholarly understanding of communication theory in your everyday life (Dainton & Zelley, 2022). In fact, connecting your understanding of communication theory to your routine sports experiences is perhaps one of the easiest ways to do this. That is because theorizing in sport communication involves both scholarly and applied thinking about the topic (Pedersen et al., 2007).

Let's think back once again to the first chapter where we learned that communicative practices structure how we participate in and react to sport. Wenner (2015) explained three particular avenues in which communication and sport intersect: via media and society, through sport professions, and in the interpretation of language and symbols. Each of these research areas require thinking about communication both theoretically and practically; we want to group individual communication processes together to better understand them as a whole and we want to understand what those groupings mean for the organization, production, enactment, and consumption of sport. In addition, these three research "dispositions" align particularly well with our understanding of how communication theories developed to explain the function of sport at the individual, group, organizational, and societal level.

A Family at Play

By iStock.com/SolStock

THEORIES OF MEDIA AND SOCIETY

We will first discuss communication theories of media and society and how they connect to sport. Abeza et al. (2014) conducted a content analysis of one of the leading journals in the discipline (*International Journal of Sport Communication*) to determine the most commonly used theories in our field. Note that a content analysis is a systematic study of recorded communication artifacts, such as newspapers, advertisements, and films. Not surprisingly, an abundance of sport communication research has centered on sports media artifacts including broadcasts, news stories, websites, and social media, among others. As a result, theories of media effects are commonly used to understand the relationships between sports media and society.

Theories of media effects identify how audiences process sports media and the effects that media have on them. Abeza and colleagues (2014) identified the most commonly used media effects theories in sport communication research to be agenda setting, framing, uses and gratifications, parasocial interaction, disposition, cultivation, social identification, self-categorization, and excellence theories. Ten years later, Cummins and Hahn (2024) outlined the most frequently cited theories within the most established journal in the field, *Communication & Sport* (see Table 2.1). New additions to the fray included hegemonic masculinity, hegemony, heteronormativity, Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRGing; considered to be a component of social identification), and hypermasculinity.

Here, we will focus on the theories represented in both Abeza et al.'s (2014) and Cummins and Hahn's (2024) review: agenda setting, framing, uses and gratifications, parasocial interaction, and social identification theory, which incorporates aspects of self-categorization and

TABLE 2.1 ■ Most Frequently Cited Theories and/or Concepts Cited within Sampled *C&S* Articles		
Theory/Concept	**Frequency**	**% within Sample**
Hegemonic Masculinity	44	24%
Framing	42	23%
Hegemony	19	10%
Social Identity Theory	15	8%
Heteronormativity	14	8%
Parasocial Interaction/ Relationships	13	7%
Agenda Setting	10	6%
BIRGing	10	6%
Hypermasculinity	10	6%
Uses and Gratifications	9	5%

BIRGing. Future chapters will detail other theoretical perspectives associated with media and society. Chapters 5 (Legacy Media Interactions) and 6 (Social and User-Generated Media Interactions) will illustrate the strong bonds we form to our favorite teams and athletes via disposition theory. Chapter 7 (Sports Storytelling) will outline how sports stories cultivate specific attitudes and beliefs about society. Furthermore, Chapters 10 (Performance of Sports Identity) and 11 (Sports and Politics) will grapple with notions of hegemonic masculinity and hegemony.

Agenda Setting and Framing

Agenda setting posits that mass media force attention to certain issues. This is different than the debunked hypodermic needle theory where media tell people what to think; instead, agenda setting is about the ability of mass media to help dictate what we think *about*. Former journalists McCombs and Shaw (1972) first identified the agenda setting function at work among North Carolina residents during the 1968 U.S. Presidential campaign. Their goal was to see whether the issues that residents reported as important were the same issues that the mass media reported as important during the same time period. By conducting interviews with residents and a content analysis of media coverage at the same time, they found that the issues deemed important by residents and the media largely matched. McCombs and Shaw were able to conclude that media consumers learn about issues and how much importance to place on them from the media. As a result, media set the agenda as to what audiences should know and think about. Although their initial studies focused on political news coverage, agenda setting has now been examined in multiple contexts, including sports.

In 2005, McCombs reflected on the past, present, and future of agenda setting and argued for the presence of multiple agendas in today's society. In particular, he acknowledged the applicability of agenda setting within the sports media domain, especially as it relates to sports fans. This is largely because the sports media agenda is comprised of content from live event broadcasts, sports news, documentaries, and social media. This agenda is reinforced via fan ties to our favorite sports, teams, and players, as well as our in-person attendance at sporting events. One example that demonstrates this is the expressed and perceived political agendas in sports. While there is no doubt that sport and politics are inextricably linked, in the last 10 years, professional leagues have taken explicit stands on political issues through visible statements on player uniforms, playing surfaces, and other avenues. These statements are disseminated to audiences through live sporting event broadcasts, establishing and reinforcing particular agendas. Note, we only scratch the surface here—Chapter 11 will detail these dynamics more in-depth.

CASE STUDY

Agenda Setting and the NFL

The National Football League (NFL) entered new broadcast agreements with CBS, ESPN, FOX, and NBC in 2006. During that season, the NFL made strategic programming changes, moving *Monday Night Football* to ESPN and *Sunday Night Football* to NBC. Rotating Thursday and Saturday night games were aired on the NFL Network for the last 6 weeks of the regular

season. The NFL also allowed NBC to request "flex" games for the last third of the season, where Sunday afternoon games could be moved to Sunday nights. During that same season, audience viewership of NFL games increased across all contracted networks. Fortunato (2008) presented this scenario as an example of agenda setting by the NFL. By strategically placing games at specific times across networks, the NFL was able to increase ratings and advertising revenue. Most importantly, instituting the "flex" option allowed the NFL to prioritize and emphasize certain primetime matchups on NBC—featuring better teams with better chances of making the playoffs later in the season. In this sense, the games mattered more and were likely to draw larger audiences because of the implications. Since 2006, the NFL has had flex scheduling for *Sunday Night Football*. For the 2024 season, they opted to use flex scheduling for *Monday Night Football* and *Thursday Night Football*. For NFL viewers, this strategy increases the likelihood of seeing quality matchups between winning teams. For NFL teams who are having a surprise breakout season, it increases the likelihood of being moved to prime time and increasing their overall exposure. Clearly, this scheduling approach has benefited the NFL, but it can complicate travel schedules for teams, players, and spectators who attend the games in person.

1. The NFL must give 28 days' notice for *Thursday Night Football* flexing decisions, 12 days for *Monday Night Football*, and for games near the end of the season, only 6 days' notice for *Sunday Night Football*. Purchased tickets cannot be exchanged if a game is flexed. Do you think this is fair to the teams and athletes who travel and play the games? Is this fair to fans who have spent a significant amount of money to attend a game in person if the dates change by up to 3 days earlier or later?
2. Historically, the NFL has employed a revenue sharing model among its 32 teams. Is it fair to prioritize and move winning teams to prime time broadcast slots when less successful teams were already scheduled at those times?
3. Some would argue the NFL's decision to play games overseas is also an example of the league's attempt to set the agenda in other markets. What are the pros and cons of having games played in overseas markets but not having team franchises in those locations?

Whereas agenda setting focuses on what issues are portrayed in the media, framing is a perspective that focuses on how issues are portrayed in the media (Weaver, 2007). Framing can be defined as the selection and elevation of particular attributes of media artifacts (Entman, 1993). Historically, agenda setting has applied to news and political media coverage; framing, on the other hand, has been applied across multiple genres of content.

Framing studies of sport communication, especially sports media coverage, have increased over the last several decades. Many have examined how athletes of different genders and races are represented in media (e.g., Duncan & Messner, 1998; Mastro et al., 2011), and to date, this literature is summarized as such: women athletes tend to be sexualized (and placed in secondary roles) as compared to men athletes; Hispanic, Latine, and Asian athletes are underrepresented in sports media coverage in comparison to their participation rates in sports overall; and Black athletes are overrepresented in crime news coverage in comparison to their participation rates in sports overall. More recent avenues of research have explored the framing of athlete mental health (Cassilo & Sanderson, 2024), student-athlete suicide (Parrott, 2024), and transgender

athlete bans (Martin & Rahilly, 2023), among others. From this small sample of studies, we can see how framing allows researchers to analyze a wide range of media content to account for the presence (or absence) of attributes of their choosing.
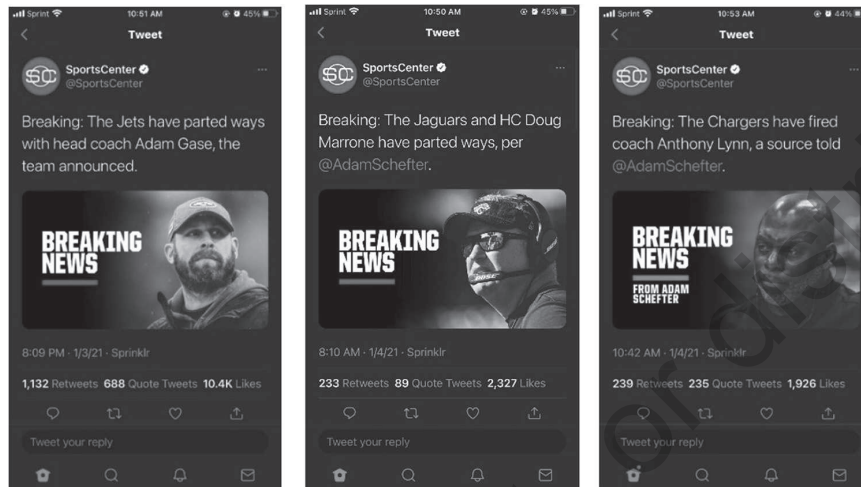

ESPN Posts on NFL Head Coaching Firings

Chicago Tribune Posts on Corey Cogell-Unrein's Bronze Medal Win

Uses and Gratifications

Developed by Elihu Katz and colleagues (Katz & Foulkes, 1962; Katz et al., 1973), uses and gratifications (U&G) proposed that media audiences are active in their media consumption, and they select media content based on individual needs, interests, and expected outcomes. Sports media audiences, in particular, tend to be an active and engaged audience. As you learned in Chapter 1, live sporting events are among the most-viewed television broadcasts in

any given year, especially megaevents such as the Olympics and FIFA World Cup. Perhaps more importantly, even in today's digital streaming age, most sporting events are watched live, in real time. Furthermore, a good proportion of social media use and engagement is centered on sports. Across the globe, two-thirds of people regularly follow sports on media platforms and one-third of them use social media to do so (YouGov, 2023). In 2021, 3.7 billion Tweets were about sports, an approximate 1 billion increase from 2020 (Barbieri, 2022). Sports media scholars have used U&G as a helpful framework to understand what drives audiences to sports content and the outcomes associated with it.

In 1981, Gantz first identified several U&G related to sports consumers and their viewing of live sporting event broadcasts. Those included anticipating the event itself, adding excitement to their day, letting loose, and rooting for their favored athlete or team. Raney (2006) later categorized the needs associated with live sports viewing to be centered on cognitive, emotional, and social drives. While some of these U&G are similar to other genres of content, such as reality television and game shows, the anticipation, excitement, and thrill of unknown outcomes associated with live sporting events are arguably unique because sports consumers often have strong and long-standing bonds with their favorite athletes and teams, which increases the investment they have in contest outcomes. Since the 1980s, the literature in this area has expanded, accounting for sports consumption on multiple screens (Cunningham & Eastin, 2017), on social media (Billings et al., 2019), and across fantasy sport and gambling platforms (Weiner & Dwyer, 2017). U&G is extremely helpful for understanding why people use different types of media and the outcomes associated with them. But there is not an established set of U&G for sports media consumption. They are wide-ranging and sometimes specific to the context and platform at hand. This can limit the applicability of U&G, depending on the content.
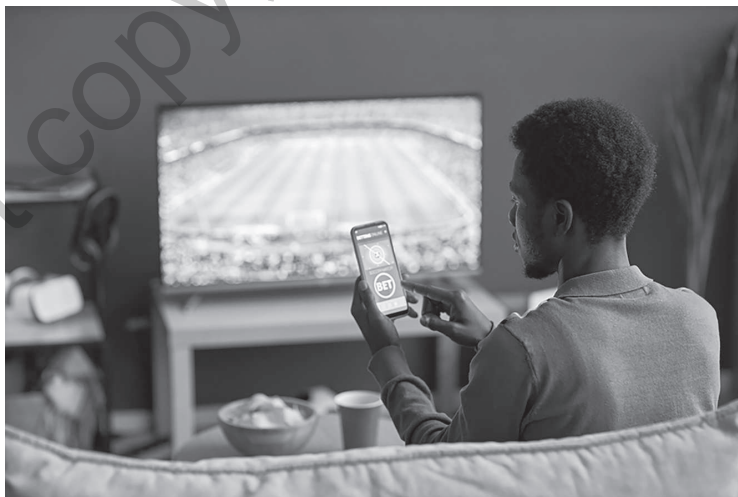
Sports Media Consumption Across Multiple Screens and Devices

By iStock.com/SeventyFour

Parasocial Interaction

Many of us are fans of celebrities, such as actors or athletes. We watch their movies or attend their games, follow them on social media, and read news coverage about them. In a way, we feel like we know them, even though these celebrities have no idea who we are. This phenomenon was termed as parasocial interaction by Horton and Wohl in 1956. They first identified this effect with listeners of a radio program in the late 1940s called *Lonesome Gal*. Jean King, the creator and voice of *Lonesome Gal*, would speak in a soft, soothing voice and directly address her listeners as "sweetie" and "baby," saying, "I love you." King also received thousands of fan letters and multiple marriage proposals from her "lonesome boy" listeners. This simulation of conversational "give and take" was controlled by the performer for the listening public, hence the name of the phenomenon—parasocial interaction. Parasocial interactions, which occur during the actual media experience, can progress into parasocial relationships. These relationships extend beyond an individual media experience and involve the formation of bonds with media personas over time. These bonds are one-sided and give the illusion of intimacy. Although the radio program that inspired parasocial interaction theory is from long ago, parasocial interactions and relationships (especially with the advent of social media) are alive and well in our current media landscape.

Not surprisingly, researchers have examined the parasocial interactions audiences have with celebrities, including athletes (e.g., Hartmann et al., 2008). They have also been covered extensively in the popular press (e.g., Haupt, 2023). In fact, parasocial interaction theory may be one of the most recognized communication theories in the public domain. You can commonly find

Terry Bradshaw's Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame

By iStock.com/ntzolov

threads on X and Reddit with users discussing the positives, negatives, and nuances of parasocial interactions and relationships. Opportunities for parasocial relationships have rapidly increased with the arrival of reality television and social media. In the mid-2000s, before the arrival of Facebook, a bevy of reality television programs documenting the personal lives of athletes and entertainers landed on broadcasting schedules on cable networks such as E! and VH1 and have continued in some form to the present day. *Khloe and Lamar, Lala's Full Court Life, Eric and Jesse, Hogan Knows Best, The T.O. Show*, and most recently, *The Bradshaw Bunch* are several examples of professional athletes who had cameras document their daily lives with their partners, friends, and families.

Programs like these gave viewers an inside look to the personal and professional struggles and successes of superstars like Lamar Odom, Carmelo Anthony, Hulk Hogan, and Terrell Owens. These early, lighthearted programs following athletes' lives off the court, field, and wrestling ring have given way to heavily produced documentary-style reality programs with multiple seasons in the books such as *Hard Knocks, Last Chance U*, and *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*. These programs have taken a more serious turn, portraying athletes' trials and tribulations both in competition and in their personal lives. These programs usually give unprecedented audio and visual access to practices, locker rooms, and boardrooms. As a result, audiences are exposed to the on field and off field personalities of their favorite (and least favorite) athletes—and the possibility of being surprised or disappointed if those athletes aren't exactly who consumers thought they were.

As Facebook and X arrived on the scene, social media gave sports media users 24-hour access to the feeds of athletes' profiles. COVID-19 drove many of us online—and sports leagues and athletes responded in kind. In the summer of 2020, the National Basketball Association (NBA) season resumed inside "the bubble," a designated location in Orlando, Florida, where players lived, practiced, and played. Games were held without in-person spectators, and fans were left wondering what life was like on the Orlando campus. Several players began documenting their experiences and sharing them on YouTube. Players Matisse Thybulle and Javale McGee, among others, chronicled their testing protocols, quarantine meal experiences, and difficulty leaving their families behind to continue the season. Most of these self-recorded, self-produced vlogs surpassed 1 million views, with many approaching 2 million views. In comparison, the average NBA game viewership for this same time period was around 1.5 million. NBA audiences were seeking an intimate, behind-the-scenes look into the personal lives of players. The exposure that any given sports consumer can have to live sporting events, reality programs, and social media creates a trifecta of content and information that no previous generation has had access to before. This increases the opportunity for more parasocial interactions, which in turn, can lead to more long-term parasocial relationships.

The academic literature on parasocial interactions and relationships has often debated whether they have positive or negative effects for those who engage in them. Overall, parasocial relationships can have many benefits. They can enhance our social networks through bonding with similar others (Bond, 2021) and improve mood (Stein et al., 2024). However, it is important to note that parasocial interactions with celebrities can turn negative. Parasocial interactions with athletes, in particular, may turn negative based on poor player performance.

Sanderson and colleagues (Sanderson et al., 2020) identified maladaptive parasocial interactions with athletes on X after they failed to achieve game winning performances (e.g., missing a last-second field goal). Athletes were subject to angered threats but also support. This type of parasocial interaction presents an interesting dynamic—some fans lash out at athletes who miss opportunities, while other fans (of the same team) intervene to offer support. There is much more research to be done in this space. What is for certain is that we can expect parasocial interactions and relationships with athletes to increase and intensify in the years to come.

INTERVIEW

Daniel Wann, Professor of Psychology, Murray State University

Q: What kind of scholar do you consider yourself to be?

A: My PhD is from Kansas, and as a trained social psychologist, I study social psychological processes, mainly social identity theory. Sports fans are a population I have chosen to try and understand social psychological principles and constructs among those individuals.

Q: Social psychological theory often tests characteristics of the population at hand. What makes sports fans unique as a study population?

A: There are so many advantages of studying sports fans. First, there are literally billions of them. There are as many people enjoying sports as a fan as any other voluntary activity. Anything that popular, that global, that universal, deserves to be looked at. It also means that what you're studying matters to people. I would also say that sports fandom is a social activity that does not have a scripted outcome. It is a wonderful venue for testing so many different social psychological theories within that domain. Whether it is coping strategies, how people spend their leisure time, or the ways sports help meet basic needs like belonging and distinctiveness—it differs from more passive pastimes because sports fans can't really do much to impact the outcome.

Q: What is the biggest misconception about research on sports fandom?

A: As I look back over the years, I think we really sold sport fandom short. We used to talk about it as an entertaining pastime, or escape, or as an appreciation for aesthetics, grace, and beauty. I think it's very clear now that we've accumulated enough data to indicate that sport fandom obviously meets basic psychological needs—lots and lots of them. We are seeing articles published recently about how it's meeting the need to belong and helping people adjust from national catastrophes. That's as awesome as it gets. We are studying something that gives people a sense of purpose, a sense of meaning. Sports fandom matters to people in deep, important, and profound ways.

Q: Sport communication as a distinct, scholarly domain is relatively new. Our scholarship draws on a lot of other established disciplines, including yours. What advice do you have for sport communication researchers?

A: I think one of the greatest disappointments as I look back is how those who study sports fans, or sport psychology, marketing, communication, or sport and religious studies is, for some reason, we are never on the same page. Those who want to understand sport are going to have to go all of these different disciplines because we have not done a

good job talking to one another. I would love it if there was a sport research conference that brought in everyone from all of these disciplines. Professional organizations like the Sport Marketing Association (SMA) and the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS), can we get into the same room for one giant congress? The communication scholars, social psychologists, sociologists, and marketers, can you imagine what that would be like? I would love to see that happen.

Q: What do you see for the future of sports fans?

A: I think there's going to be a lot of upheaval for sports fans in the coming years, particularly college sports fans. But, a seismic shift in one sport will have implications for other sports. For example, when the concussion issue came out in the NFL 20 years ago, it had implications for that sport, but it also has implications for soccer and other sports. There's always these ripple effects. Similarly, 20 years from now, what betting did to sports will also be interesting. Sports-specific theories that are more than 15 years old need to be reconsidered because of social media. I also think virtual reality is going to have implications for sport fandom. Will it catch on? They said that night games would never catch on, so who knows? The same could be said for Caitlin Clark's potential impact on the Women's National Basketball Association. It's having such an impact on changing that sport, and again, there is a ripple effect on these kind of things. How many young girls are watching that right now? That's going to be fascinating.

Social Identity

The theories discussed to this point are anchored firmly in the mass media scholarship. Now we will discuss a theoretical perspective that was first developed in social psychology and then went on to have utility in the sport communication domain: social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978). It proposes that our individual identity and self-esteem are closely tied to the social groups we belong to. This creates ingroups and outgroups, where we want to bolster the reputation of our ingroups and distance ourselves from the reputations of outgroups. Commonly applied to identity across race, gender, and other individual differences, sport, specifically sport fanship, provides a natural avenue to examine social identity at work. Natural ingroups and outgroups (rivalries) are created by the teams we are fans of. Cialdini and colleagues (1976) expanded on social identity in a sports context by studying it relation to game outcomes. Termed BIRGing, they found college students to wear more school apparel after victories than defeats; they also used "we" to describe their college team more often after wins than losses. Alternatively, CORFing (Cutting Off Reflected Failure), was also documented after defeats. Students were more likely to use "they" to describe their team after defeats than victories. Both BIRGing and CORFing behaviors reflect our desire to enhance our self-image via group membership. Social identity formation and maintenance is a social psychological process, but expressions of our social identities happen largely through communication. In a sports context, we do this through interpersonal and group communication with our fellow fans, friends, and family members—spending Sundays on the couch celebrating victory (or commiserating defeat) with our loved ones; going to the local sports bar to root for our favorite collegiate teams and conversing with complete strangers bonded only by their allegiance to their favored team; and

playing recreational softball on weeknights to keep up the spirit of competition as we age out of the sports we played growing up. We also communicate our social identities through mediated communication by watching multiple games per day or week so that we can keep up with our fantasy teams online; we also spend hours on social media and sports news websites looking for statistics, hot takes, and think pieces about the athletes and teams we care about. We also display our fanship on our clothes, cars, apartments, and homes by wearing jerseys, t-shirts, and displaying memorabilia so that we can express to others what groups we belong to. All of this goes to say that for many of us, a substantial portion of our overall identity (among being a parent, sibling, friend, and coworker) is tied to our sports fanship.

Rival Fans Watching a Soccer Match at the Local Pub

By iStock.com/Miodrag ignjatovic

THEORIES OF SPORT PROFESSIONS

The sports industry employs professionals who are responsible for the organization, production, enactment, and consumption of sport. Scholars have developed theories of professional work to understand communication processes as they occur in this domain. Most research in this area has focused on the professions of athletes and sports journalists. However, there are an incredibly large number of professions and positions in the central and peripheral domain of sport. Several theoretical perspectives are provided here, but the list is not exhaustive. In McQuail's (2010) comprehensive overview of mass communication theory, he noted that the connection between professional theory and practice is generally lacking, so the theories offered here speak more to the relationship between sport professionals' work and its connection to the audiences who consume it.

Diffusion of Innovations

Diffusion of innovations describes the process by which an innovation spreads and is adapted in a social system. The innovation itself can be an idea, practice, or new technology. The diffusion

of innovations theory was put forth by a researcher of communication and sociology named Everett Rogers who grew up on a farm in rural Iowa. His father was a working farmer who was hesitant to adapt a new line of hybrid seed corn for planting, but when he saw a neighboring farm's corn thriving from the hybrid seed while his wilted, he adapted it.

So, why are we reading about corn? The hesitation and eventual adaptation that Rogers's father experienced in eventually using the hybrid seed corn reflected a similar process many of us, and societies as a whole, go through when determining whether or not to adapt to a social change. Rogers (1962) formally proposed the diffusion of innovation as the "process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system" (p. 5). Rogers demonstrated the diffusion of innovations through several documented examples, including the public health initiative of encouraging local villagers to boil their drinking water to prevent disease in Peru (which failed) and the eventual adaptation of citrus on British naval ships to prevent scurvy (which succeeded, but took over 200 years). These examples demonstrate that even when an innovation clearly results in positive change, adaptations often occur slowly.

We can apply the diffusion of innovations theory to sport in a variety of ways. Remember the innovation at hand can be an idea, practice, or new technology—and adaptation depends on communication. Two examples that demonstrate the diffusion of innovations in sport, one being a failure and the other being a success, involve the rejection of 3DTV sports broadcasts and the acceptance of safety equipment in auto racing. In the early 2010s, there were multiple attempts to bring stereoscopic (or 3DTV) television into our living rooms via television sets themselves or wearable technology such as 3D headsets. In past decades, live sporting event broadcasts had proven to be an excellent testing ground for new innovations, including the zoom lens, instant replay, and graphics packages (Deninger, 2012). So pubs across Great Britian ordered 3DTVs from Sky Sports and LG in hopes of selling 3D soccer broadcasts to eager and awaiting fans (Pope, 2020). Prior to this experiment, 3D had divided audiences as either an immersive experience or a cheap novelty. Sky Sports and ESPN both invested in the potential of live sports in 3D by starting their own in-home channels. However, issues related to camera placement at the venues, editing, and viewer-reported experiences of headaches and nausea slowed the adaptation process. 3D versions of the graphics commonly seen on sports broadcasts (e.g., scrolling lower third graphics with scores and statistics) were also identified as nausea inducing. Audiences also tired of the cost of and requirement to wear 3D glasses. Over the next several years, Sky Sports and ESPN pulled their investment into 3DTV, and television manufacturers stopped producing the sets as well.

Although 3D sports provided an arguably better-quality viewing experience at the time, the innovation itself was not enough to propel its acceptance among soccer fans who still valued the pub experience of watching a match with friends and socializing without needing to wear additional headgear. 3DTV wasn't accepted as a technology or practice that sports viewers were willing to participate in. And this rejection was in spite of global media networks (Sky, ESPN) and television manufacturers (e.g., LG, Sony) investing large scale resources into the product. Their research, development, and marketing teams were not able to translate the technological innovation of 3D into an adapted social practice among sports viewers.

Alternatively, an example of a diffusion of innovation in sport that was eventually successful was the NASCAR mandate for all drivers to use the Head and Neck Support (HANS) system as a safety precaution during races. At the start of the century, very few drivers used the device despite scientific evidence that it prevented deadly injuries in the racecar ("Hans Device," 2001). Some drivers pushed back on using the device because they wanted to avoid change, argued that it restricted movement in the driver seat, and because it did not enhance performance. In the early 1990s, when the technology was first developed, early adopters even faced social scrutiny for wearing the device, often being mocked for using it.

However, after racing legend Dale Earnhardt's death in the 2001 Daytona 500, NASCAR eventually required the HANS device of all drivers to prevent skull fractures that had killed multiple drivers over the years. By that point, drivers had mostly accepted the mandate as second nature and come to appreciate the benefits of it (Martin, 2011). In this case, the technological innovation did reach social acceptance and adoption, resulting in behavior change. It required large scale efforts from health experts to effectively communicate the importance of the device and for NASCAR as a governing sport organization to mandate change for the better safety of their drivers. Drivers also had to communicate about their willingness to use the device and appreciation for its safety benefits.
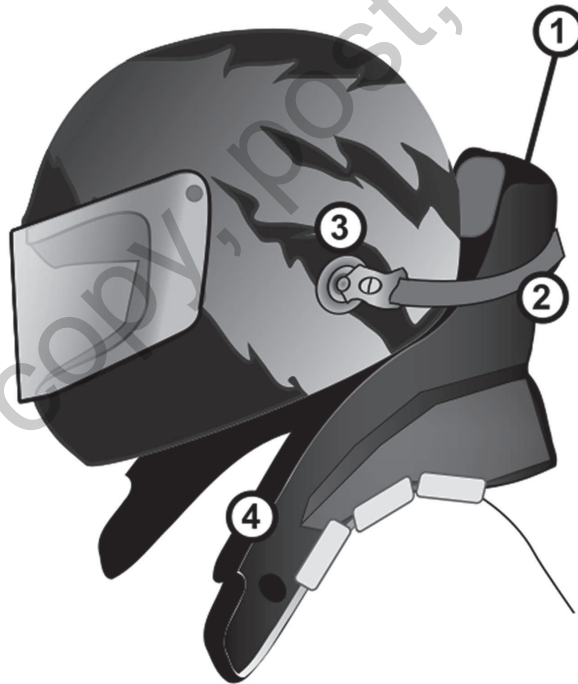

Illustration of the HANS Device

By Dake. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_-_head_and_neck_safety_system.svg, licensed under CC BY 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

Driver Using the HANS Device

By iStock.com/vm

Convergence

Nearly 25 years ago, Henry Jenkins (2004) foresaw the merging of our media environment across industries, technologies, and audiences. He adopted the term *convergence* to explain the integration and flow of media industries, content, and consumption. Here, we focus on three particular areas where convergence can clearly be seen: through marketing, technology, and psychology.

Before the digital age, information was stored and transmitted on analog media; that is, we had "hard copies" of information. For many, those hard copies were in the form of "at home" media, including recorded albums, reel-to-reel video tapes, cassette tapes, and video tapes. In the 1980s, with the arrival of computer technology, information could be stored as digital files and transmitted without those hard copies that many audiences had developed collections of.

Similarly, prior to the digital age, media industries were very much siloed and had specific operating and marketing strategies. Newspaper, film, radio, and television producers developed their content separately and targeted different audiences, or at least targeted audiences for different reasons depending on their content. In the early 1990s, industry mergers began in earnest, and newspaper, film, radio, and television producers began consolidating into mega corporations, all under one ownership (e.g., ABC Disney, NewsCorp). As a result, these corporations began marketing similar products across multiple platforms. We can look at the Olympics as an example. NBC has had broadcasting rights for the Summer Olympics in the United State[s] for nearly 40 years (and has had the rights for the Winter Olympics for over 20 years). NBC is owned by Comcast, who also owns the film studio Universal Studios, television networks CNBC, MSNBC, USA,

Olympic Ring Sculpture in Front of the Comcast Center

By iStock.com/Erik Gonzalez Garcia

Bravo, E!, Oxygen, and Telemundo, and the streaming service Peacock. Since 2000, NBC has broadcast some Olympic events on Comcast's ancillary networks, including CNBC, MSNBC, USA, Bravo, Oxygen, and Telemundo. In 2020, Peacock began streaming live and replay Olympic coverage. During the several weeks of Olympic coverage across the Comcast offerings, each network and streaming service has the opportunity to promote their own programming and feature Olympians and Olympic segments in them. Recently, famed director Steven Spielberg appeared in promotions for the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics. Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment is a subsidiary of Universal Studios (owned by Comcast), His critically acclaimed 2005 film, *Munich*—released by Universal Studios—was based on the 1972 Summer Olympics terrorist attack in Munich, Germany. Convergence across film studios, television networks, and streaming platforms promoted similar messages across all Comcast-owned media, giving the consumer a false sense of choice and variety. This is just one example where similar products are marketed across multiple platforms and media formats to reach as many potential consumers as possible.

If you are a digital native who has spent most, if not all, of your life "wired" and "online," it is important to note the psychological component of convergence. Broadband and wireless Internet access allow us on a daily and hourly basis to transcend restrictions of space and time. Prior generations used analog media and physical means of transportation to transmit information. Now, we are able to largely communicate instantaneously across the globe, which increases the opportunity for more wide-ranging social networks that were previously limited by our physical geographic location. This has allowed us to express our interest in sport and demonstrate allegiances to our favorite teams and players via international streaming and social media. These expressions can be sent and received across the globe, providing opportunities to enhance and extend our sport networks. This is a fundamentally new dynamic in sport communication within the last 20 years, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter 6. Convergence is an ongoing process, where structural, legal, and social factors are all at play in determining our relationships with media and technology. Jenkins (2004) argued that with convergence, our media use across devices, platforms, genres, and content is all connected. And, in the age of convergence, the balance of power between media corporations and media consumers is always in flux.

Encoding, Decoding, and Bias

The encoding/decoding model of communication is informally known as reception theory. Developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s by cultural scholar Stuart Hall, he pushed back on existing linear models of communication. Remember in Chapter 1 we discussed the sender, message, and receiver model of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1948) commonly reviewed in introductory public speaking and communication theory courses. The sender, message, and receiver model is wholly linear—one directional in nature where the sender controls a message sent directly to the receiver. By the 1970s, communication scholars had confirmed that this proposed linear model was often complicated by a variety of factors—perhaps the most important being that the intended meaning of a message by a sender often had unintended effects on the receiver. Hall developed the encoding/decoding model to capture both message meaning construction and interpretation.

In his influential 1980-chapter, Hall established several key axioms counter to traditional linear models of communication (Hall, 2001). First, he determined that message meanings cannot be fixed by the sender. Second, audiences are not simply passive receivers of message meanings. Third, messages are never transparent, that is, media messages are not exactly what they seem to be. They are influenced by underlying social structures and context. Furthermore, messages are encoded one way by the senders but can be decoded multiple ways by audiences. There were three levels of decoding identified by Hall: (1) dominant hegemonic decoding, where the audience accepts the meaning intended by the sender; (2) negotiated decoding, where the audience accepts some meaning intended by the sender, but not all; and (3) oppositional decoding, where audiences reject and resist the meaning intended by the sender.

Encoding/decoding captured the more nuanced media broadcasting relationship between producers and consumers—and explained why media producers' content did not always have the intended effects on their audiences. McQuail (2010) emphasized that media messages are created within networks and institutions whose operations are likely to conform to dominant social practices, so established media genres, including live sports and sports news, come to us in an expected format, and we, as audience members, have established expectations for what we consume. Media networks also anticipate how audiences will react to content based on prior experience. One example that demonstrates the variety of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional decoding we can engage in involves LeBron James. In July 2010, James was arguably the biggest athletic superstar in the world. Becoming a free agent for the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers (his hometown team) after seven seasons, he appeared on a live televised special on ESPN to announce his next career move. Several teams were in the running for his new contract, including the New York Knicks, Chicago Bulls, Miami Heat, and Cleveland Cavaliers. *The Decision* was a 75-minute live primetime ESPN broadcast where James announced his decision to join the Miami Heat approximately 30 minutes into the broadcast.

LeBron James

Although the program had extremely high ratings, the backlash was swift. The length it took for James to announce his decision (which was filled with sports media analysts discussing what he might do), the air of superiority around his statement of, "taking my talents to South Beach," and the betrayal that Cleveland Cavaliers' fans experienced all added up to a public relations nightmare. Cleveland Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert accused James of being selfish, Cleveland residents burned James jerseys and other memorabilia, and former NBA players criticized his approach to the situation. His popularity temporarily declined, and he issued multiple statements in the following years stating he regretted announcing his career change in the way that he did (see Brown et al., 2012).

Interestingly, the broadcast was not originally James's idea. It came from an ESPN viewer's suggestion to journalist Bill Simmons, who approached James's agent and advisor, and they agreed to the program intending it to be a charity event on James's behalf. ESPN, operating as the leading network in sports television, created the broadcast in hopes of drawing a huge audience and to reinforce its reputation as the place for breaking sports news and must-see sporting events (Ohlmeyer, 2010). However, ESPN compromised its journalistic ethics by giving James a platform to control the narrative on his terms. As seen in the varied responses by viewers, the intended reading by ESPN was to bring a global superstar on the verge of a major career decision into their living rooms. Audience members responded and interpreted the meaning of *The Decision* differently. Some accepted the dominant hegemonic meaning, accepting the broadcast for what it was intended to be—a breaking news announcement from an NBA all-star. Others engaged in negotiated decoding, accepting the breaking news portion of it, but becoming frustrated at the length of time it took to announce James's choice and the hype surrounding what should have been a clearcut news story. Finally, some rejected the dominant meaning through oppositional decoding. They expressed outrage toward ESPN for using its platform in this manner and demonstrated anger toward James for his seemingly selfish superiority (even though, again, the event was intended for charity). This example reminds us that consumers are able to interpret the intended meaning of media messages in different ways, just as Hall (2001) suggested decades ago.

Reported and perceived bias by media corporations, in particular news organizations, also relates to how audiences interpret the same media messages in different ways. The hostile media perception (Vallone et al., 1985) explains the biases that audiences have toward news coverage of an issue they have a strong opinion on. In the sport domain, fans of particular athletes and teams are more likely to believe that media is biased toward those athletes and teams no matter what the media coverage portrays. These perceptions have been identified in both sports news coverage (e.g., Arpan & Raney, 2003) and live sporting event coverage. Hastorf and Cantril's classic 1954 study demonstrated this very phenomenon with Princeton and Dartmouth University students. The researchers showed the same film of a football game between the two universities to students from each. Princeton students were more likely to report rough play by Dartmouth players; Dartmouth students were more likely to report rough play by Princeton players. Once again, we see that sports media consumers can perceive and interpret different meanings from the same messaging.

A MATTER OF ETHICS

Sports Betting Information: An Emerging Form of Bias?

Bias in sports reporting has been documented for decades, especially in the coverage of women and minority athletes (see Eastman & Billings, 2000; Peña & Bock, 2024). However, with the emergence and legalization of online sports betting, a new form of potential bias among media members of sports organizations has come to the fore. Many workers in the

sport industries, especially those in the media, are privy to inside information that could make sports betting predictions more successful regarding the winners and losers of future events. A recent report found that many news organizations did not have formal guidelines for their journalists regarding sports betting (Scire, 2023). Bias could emerge in several ways. First, journalists could use the information they acquire in exclusive spaces such as press boxes, locker rooms, and practice areas to place bets themselves. Second, they could place bets on behalf of the players, teams, and leagues they cover for mutual gain. Finally, and perhaps most concerning, they could report information that otherwise would not be reported to sportsbook operators that could skew betting lines one way or another. As availability and access to sports betting platforms and opportunities grow, so does the risk for this conflict of interest.

Do you think sports journalists should be allowed to place bets on sports? If other sport industry workers are employed by a particular league or team, should they be able to place bets on them?

1. Whose responsibility is it to monitor the betting activities of sport industry workers? The organization? The individual? No one?
2. Would you institute a code of ethics around sports betting in the sports industries? If so, what would it look like?

THEORIES OF LANGUAGE AND SYMBOLS

Theories of language and symbols in communication are anchored less in mass communication research and more in cultural, rhetorical, and interpersonal domains. Perhaps one of the most influential cultural communication scholars of recent time was James Carey (1989) who, similar to Stuart Hall (2001), resisted linear, transmission-based models of communication. He argued that communication was ritual; individual messages mattered little, but the act of communication was communal sharing with one another. Put another way, he argued communication to be the "maintenance of society in time" (p. 18). Pedersen et al. (2007) argued for a similar definition of communication, where symbols are shared in a sport setting, and meaning is created through interaction. Symbols in sport are centered in language and other signifiers that express and support norms and values of larger sport culture (see Chapter 8). It could also be argued that sport consumers are a specific interpretive community, where some of the symbols, language, texts, and practices benefit from a shared meaning and understanding (McQuail, 2010). These conceptualizations of communication are quite different than sender, message, and receiver models (e.g., Shannon & Weaver, 1948). Ritual views of communication suggest an interactive experience, where communicating individual pieces of information is less relevant than the sustainment of norms, values, and culture.

Rhetorical and Semiotic Traditions

Here, we present rhetorical and semiotic traditions in sport communication based on two key propositions: speech has influence (rhetorical theory), and symbols have meaning (semiotic theory). Speech is one of the oldest forms of communication, and rhetoric is one of the oldest

areas of scholarly study. Rhetorical theory explains how we participate in public discourse and why it matters (Craig, 1999). Rhetorical studies on the discourse around sport have grown in recent decades. Butterworth (2016) organized this body of literature around four frames: public address, metaphor, mythology, and representation. Many studies on public address in sport are centered on image repair. Athletes are public figures, and there are many instances where they have fallen from grace (e.g., Tiger Woods, Lance Armstrong). Rhetorical examinations of public address provide insight into the image repair strategies athletes use to varying success (see also Chapter 14—Reputation & Crisis Management in Sport).

Image repair can be understood as an *instrumental* use of rhetoric—in other words, rhetoric is a tool by which persuasive aims may (or may not) be achieved. Contemporary rhetorical theory is often more focused on a *constitutive* use of rhetoric—in other words, rhetoric is a symbolic means of influencing ideologies, representations, and uses of power. Rhetorical scholars in this second tradition are often influenced by critical/cultural theory—ranging from feminism to deconstruction to psychoanalysis—and their work attends to the political effects sport can have on communities and societies. This approach is not necessarily opposed to sport, but it often includes critiques that seek to make sport less exploitive and more democratic. The rhetorical tradition in communication studies is centered largely in North America, but a similar vocabulary and constitutive approach can be found in global studies using critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2015).

Constitutive approaches include studies of metaphors and sport, which are wide ranging and dependent on the scope of the metaphor. Sports can serve as a metaphor for life in general (Segrave, 2000), but we can also use sports metaphors as common turns of phrase in our daily lives. These metaphors can be stand-ins or shortcuts for the things that we might really want to say about our jobs, friends, family, and love life. Similarly, mythology of and around sport is pervasive; we are accustomed to fables about heroes and villains. Rhetorical perspectives suggest that these myths serve as important cultural guideposts. Chapter 8 (Sport and Mythology) will discuss this in more detail. Finally, sport as a cultural phenomenon is often presented to us via the media. These media representations are public and reinforce cultural values, Rhetorical scholars illuminate the intersection of sport and other cultural attributes including race, gender, sexuality, and politics—largely defining it as a white, masculine, heterosexual, and militaristic space (e.g., Fuller, 2006). Chapters 9 (Media Representations of Sports Identity), 10 (Performance of Sports Identity), 11 (Sport and Politics), and 12 (Sport and National Identity) will touch on each of these aspects.

Remember that Carey (1989) suggested an interactive view of communication. Semiotics also embraces this perspective by proposing that each of us determine the meaning of signs and symbols in our world, which if we don't agree on the meaning of those symbols, can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding (Craig, 1999). In sport and other cultural products (e.g., religion, politics), verbal and nonverbal signs are used to communicate meaning. In his analysis of Proctor & Gamble's Olympic personal care product advertisements in 2012, Lee (2017) employed a semiotic approach and identified several key signifiers in advertising featuring men and women athletes. Chris Hoy, an Olympic champion cyclist, was visually portrayed in an advertisement wearing a racing uniform and riding a competition bicycle. Victoria Pendleton, also an Olympic champion cyclist, was featured wearing noncompetition clothing and riding a noncompetition

bicycle. These visual signifiers were argued to represent traditional Westernized gender norms. Despite having achieved similar athletic accomplishments, Hoy appeared as a natural male athlete, while Pendleton appeared as a sexualized woman. However, this is not the only viable interpretation of those images. It is possible for cultures and individuals who have little awareness of the Olympics as a global competition of elite athletes or cycling as a competitive endeavor to interpret these images in fundamentally different ways. Semiotics allows for the intersubjective study of images and symbols, where meanings vary based on individual viewpoints.

Cultural Imperialism

In a similar vein, other theories of language and symbols are centered on the power dynamics in social structures, including sport. These approaches are anchored in Marxist ideals, where sport provides a context for understanding how those with power (e.g., social and financial) interact with those without power (e.g., the working class). This power, centralized among those in control of government and industry organizations, dominates the discourse of ideas in favor of maintaining the status quo. These dynamics are captured in the concept of cultural imperialism, which describes how a powerful entity (e.g., nation) institutes its influence on a less powerful one. Cultural imperialism is documented and often occurs through communication—especially mediated communication (Boyd-Barrett, 2018). Media artifacts (e.g., advertisements, television programs, films) present specific cultural norms and values. Media producers in dominant cultures can exert their influence (including those norms and values) onto less dominant cultures. Cultural imperialization, in its original conceptualization, was assumed to be unidirectional, but we know that isn't always the case. Dominant cultures can be influenced by others (e.g., the increasing popularity of Yoga in the United States by way of India). However, much of what we see regarding cultural imperialism today involves "Americanization," or the influence of U.S. culture on other cultures. We can see this dynamic in the sports industry as well, where the large professional leagues and media corporations can impose their power on smaller organizations, groups, and the individuals who are members of them, including athletes and consumers. Their operational and decision-making practices may not serve the larger underclass and underserved. They also have more control over the narratives and messaging they produce, exerting even more influence on general members of society. This limits the number of diverse voices from being heard and squanders community-based decision making (Pedersen et al., 2007).

Thus, these perspectives can also lead us to think more deeply about the nature of work in the sport industry. What constraints and limitations regularly confront those who work in sport? An athlete may be less likely to speak out against discrimination and injustice in the workplace for fear of retaliation; a newspaper journalist may pass on a story investigating corruption in a local youth sports league because of pressure from the newspaper's ownership; or an hourly employee at a sports venue may be expected to work long hours with no option for benefits and health care because of the operating procedures of ownership. Many of these constraints are centered on time, money, and other resources—all of which are influenced by those in charge of decision making at higher levels of ownership and management.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have outlined the three "dispositions" of sport (Wenner, 2015) and several theories of communication that align with each of them. These dispositions—media and society, professional work, and language and symbols—attract scholars from varied traditions. Although intellectual approaches may differ, the research produced contributes uniquely to the body of knowledge on communication and sport. The list of theories presented here is not a complete one, but hopefully you have acquired an understanding of how theories of communication apply to sport and, more importantly, how they help us think more analytically and critically about the universal role of sport in our lives.

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