

PROCESSING THE NEW SPORTS MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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People will always be drawn to sports. They love the competition, the athletes, the strategy involved. It's an obsession, and it's from this need to be involved that sports media emerged. Sports coverage began primarily with photography and coverage in newspapers in the 1800's. This largely remained the case until the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, which was the world's the first live televised sporting event. Fans watched the game, they read about it, but the appetite for sports coverage was not satisfied. Recognizing this, Chet Simmons and Scotty Connal created the ESPN network. They premiered with the first episode of SportsCenter on September 7, 1979. It was the first 24 hour network for sports, where fans could access at any time the sports content they desperately craved. By 2011, ESPN had reached grown to its peak of 100.13 million subscribers. (Gaines) The concept of ESPN was revolutionary for the time, but technology has changed, especially with the rise of the internet. New modes and platforms are now available for sports fans to engage with content. They are no longer reliant on, or limited by, ESPN and the local paper as an outlet for sports. The emergence of web content, podcasting, blogging, and social media have not only made sports content more accessible to consume, but have shattered the barriers to entry for the individual creation of sports media. Fans demand more involvement in and easier access to sports content. With the emergence and advancement of the internet, they now have this opportunity.

### **Fans Creating Content:**

Just twenty years ago, the media used to be an exclusive class in sports, dominated entirely by large media corporations and newspapers. To create content, you needed a full time job at one of these companies, media credentials, and some sort of official media training. This is because there was previously no way to distribute content to the masses without considerable resources. The internet changed all of that. The beginning of blogging and message boards began in the 1990's, and the onset of a media revolution had begun to take place. In 2018, people have the ability to create their own web pages, post on platforms such as reddit and youtube, and download home-made podcasts with little to no cost to them.

While the casual fan usually only consumes sports content, there are people entrenched in sports culture that want more out of the experience than simply a bystander role. One of these people is co-founder of Sports Business and Analytics UVA, and co-creator of sportsbusinessuva.org, Michael Rochlis. "Just the way I consume sports...there's just more of an interest than the casual fan" People who love sports rarely just take what they are watching or what is being said by the media at face value, they are always asking questions. Now, with public databases such as 538, fangraphs, and sports reference, they have the ability to answer these questions in a verifiable way. "There's always that extra layer, you read 538 and you understand some of the statistics...you wonder, what's going on here and how that fits into the bigger scheme...[creating content] is very next level, it's not just like, 'I wanna watch the game, I just wanna see who wins the championship,' there's deeper questions that can be asked...I think it shows a much more constructive way to be involved in sports" (Rochlis). Still, not all articles rely on advanced formulas and statistical data, but still it was rare that people were producing their own sports content just twenty years ago. The difference is, with the internet, there is now a platform to create content where it can be viewed by the public. For Michael, it has little to do with monetary capitalization, its much more about making a contribution to something he's passionate about. "The goal is to be good enough to have content that some people will read, and it will be validated and reposted. I want people to say, look at what this kid wrote. I've never

# SPORTS MEDIA

New Modes That Have Emerged With Technology

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## PODCASTS

Sports talk available on the go. Easy to produce and post publicly. Apple podcast app accounts for 50% to 70% of the total podcast audience. Also available on sites like Libsyn and Soundcloud.

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## SOCIAL MEDIA

News broken by insiders. Articles can be posted or promoted. Fans can interact with athletes, media members, and other fans. Anyone can comment publicly. 61% of sports viewers follow sports accounts and 80% interact on social media. Popular applications include Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat.



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## MESSAGE BOARDS AND FORUMS

Provide a forum for discussion between fans. Message strings can be a place to post content where it will be viewed. Popular sites include Reddit and Quora.

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## INTERNET SITES AND BLOGS

Have largely supplanted traditional print news. Both free sites such as The Ringer or paid sites such as The Athletic are available. Can provide broad or localized coverage. Fans can post their content publicly online via sites like wordpress.com.



thought about a question this way, but it's really interesting, the data checks out, and it was well written. That would be the biggest reward, not trying to get paid subscription.”

It's not just a theoretical fantasy either, there are extremely popular sports outlets that began with just one passionate individual. The Ringer was created by Bill Simmons and got 12.71 million visits last month. (7) His podcast, the Bill Simmons Podcast, “was the lone sports program among iTunes’ 20 most popular [podcasts].” (Spanberg) Sure, his previous career as television personality and author had given him considerable resources, but nothing compare to what ESPN has at their disposal. Still, there is not one ESPN affiliated podcast that ranks higher than his. Someone who built an empire with even fewer resources than Simmons had at his disposal is David Locke. The radio voice of the Utah Jazz, David Locke started the Locked On Podcast Network in 2016 with a single podcast, Locked on Jazz. In 2018, “Locked On...produces more than 90 different podcasts – Locked On publishes over 400 podcast episodes every week – generating more than 3 million listens a month and growing.” (“Locked On Podcast Network, Our Story”)

Since there are free options for publishing a website or posting a podcast in 2018, the only barrier is exposure. And with social media, it is possible to gain that exposure without the significant financial resources needed for paid advertising. To promote content on the UVA Sports Business and Analytics website, “for any article, [Michael and his team will] blast out a tweet or two, and same with the podcast.” (Rochlis) Bill Simmons and David Locke consistently promote their content over social media, will Bill Simmons amassing 5.87 million followers by 2018.

With the internet, the opportunity to contribute to the sports media landscape is out there, and fans are taking advantage. Whether or not they ever gain popularity or monetize their content, there will always be people eager to get their opinion out there in hopes that they can make a contribution to something they are passionate about.

### **Fans Interacting Online:**

Even when they don't have the time or motivation to create a full piece of content, fans are clamoring to have their opinions be heard. There was a time when that interactions between sports fans were restricted to the people around town. The only way people could hear from their favorite player was from behind the podium or through a newspaper clipping. Players and fans have always had strong opinions, they have just never had access to the platforms that would allow them to voice those thoughts. Through social media, comments sections, forums, and players-only sites, such as the Players Tribune, a community of discourse has been created where anyone can let their opinion be known publicly. Through social media and web forums like Reddit, fans can join conversations, often using "burner accounts" that they create for this specific purpose. There were "more than 100 million NBA-related tweets heading into the NBA Finals" (Maese) in 2018, and the /r/soccer subreddit itself has over 1 million subscribers. ("Top Sports Subreddits by Sport")

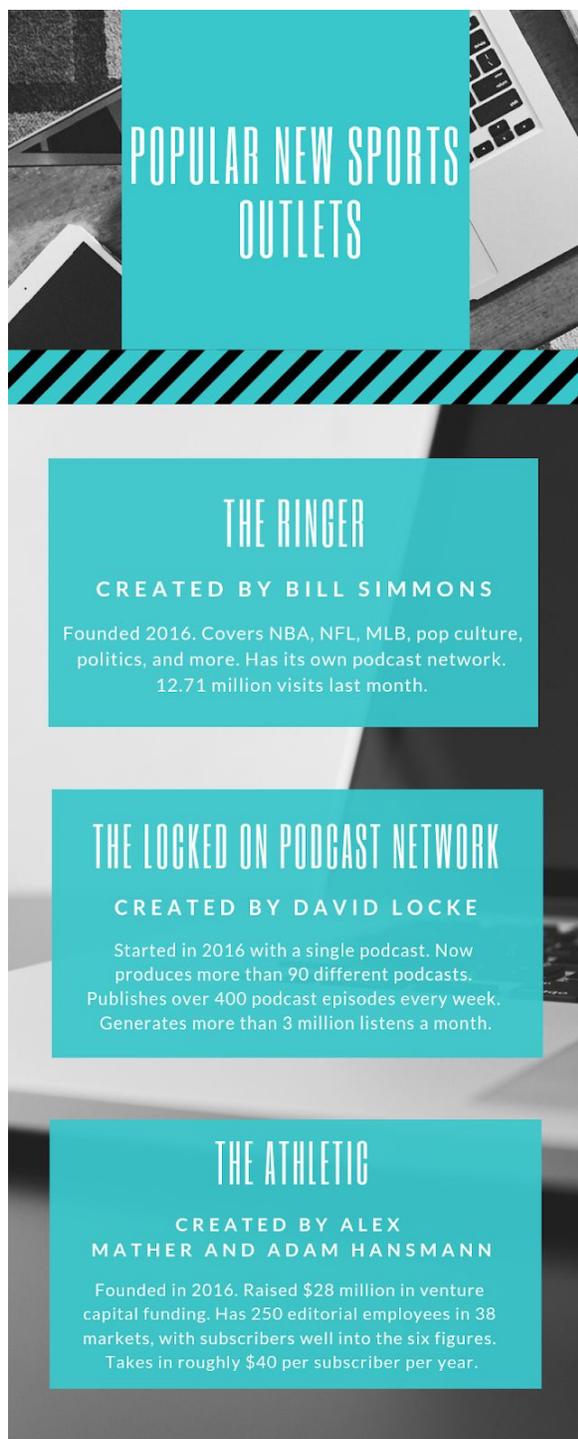
In 2018, fans not only interact with other fans, but with players and media members as well. Athletes now more than ever can let their opinions be known through social media or on a site like The Players Tribune. Cristiano Ronaldo and LeBron James have 75.3 million and 41.7 million followers respectively as of November 2018. ESPN's Stephen A. Smith has 3.83 million followers currently. Even local journalists have thousands of followers, such as Celtics beat writer Jay King with 38.8 thousand followers.

These public figures often have strong opinions, and expressing those opinions on social platforms opens them up to response from fans. Unfortunately, this open dialogue can often devolve into "trolling," especially with the option of anonymity. Journalist Sam Robinson notes that "people...that might not deserve [a voice] based on the way they behave online, suddenly have free access to you unless you lock your twitter account or something." What really is validating for people is that they know that a large percentage of the public figures they interact with do actually read what is said about them. "You see players paying attention to their twitter replies sometimes at halftime, that's something I didn't see when I first got in the business...I feel bad for the players that will just get reamed by these fans, it'll just be nonstop...I've seen certain websites turn off their comments sections" (Robinson). Fan interaction is a great way for people to be engaged and feel heard, and it's a force that has driven popularity and interest for many sports. However, it can be demoralizing to receive that amount or criticism on a public scale, especially from people whose only intention is to cause anger and illicit a response.

### **Fans Demand Easy Access to Desired Content:**

Remember the days of sitting in front of the TV watching Sportscenter, waiting for the host to finally get to the storyline about your team? It was not that long ago when people had to diligently sit in front of a television screen, or wait for the next day's paper, to get the sports content they wanted.

We are a society on the go, and in 2018, access is paramount. For podcasts, social media, and online sports websites, all that's needed is an iPhone and a pair of headphones. Bleacher Report reaches 250 million people worldwide, and as cited earlier, The Ringer and The Locked on Podcast Network also have massive following. ("Advertise With Us") As The Athletic has shown, people are even willing to pay for content if it is well written, comes to them conveniently, and encompasses their preferred sports and teams. "The company says it has subscribers 'well into the six figures' spread across its 38 local markets" (Gordon) as of



## POPULAR NEW SPORTS OUTLETS

### THE RINGER

CREATED BY BILL SIMMONS

Founded 2016. Covers NBA, NFL, MLB, pop culture, politics, and more. Has its own podcast network. 12.71 million visits last month.

### THE LOCKED ON PODCAST NETWORK

CREATED BY DAVID LOCKE

Started in 2016 with a single podcast. Now produces more than 90 different podcasts. Publishes over 400 podcast episodes every week. Generates more than 3 million listens a month.

### THE ATHLETIC

CREATED BY ALEX MATHER AND ADAM HANSMANN

Founded in 2016. Raised \$28 million in venture capital funding. Has 250 editorial employees in 38 markets, with subscribers well into the six figures. Takes in roughly \$40 per subscriber per year.

September 2018, and it is still expanding rapidly. Michael Rochlis personally gravitates towards the Ringer, in large part because of its accessibility and wide ranging coverage. “If it’s good, I’ll read about basically everything, so broad coverage is helpful there...I follow most of the teams in the three major sports, that makes it a little easier to consume it because [the Ringer is] not just focused on just a few teams,” as regional newspapers most often are. Social media also has taken over as a news outlet, with people like Jay Glazer, Adam Schefter, and Adrian Wojnarowski all breaking stories. Even other fans will frequently live tweet information and updates about games. Sam Robinson acknowledges that “I have to update scores live...(and) I am able to do this from afar...there’s no way I’d have been able to have done that a few years ago.”

With this increased competition from new on demand media, there is a deleterious effect on large media corporations such as ESPN and traditional print papers that might not be as convenient. According to former ESPN executive Jamie Horowitz, “‘SportsCenter’ ratings had dropped 27 percent since 2010. Over the last five years, ‘SportsCenter’ ratings in the 18-to-34 demo are down 36 percent.” Horowitz also believes that “news-driven shows like “SportsCenter” do not work well on television anymore since highlights are so readily available online.” (Ourand) Overall, ESPN has “lost nearly 13 million subscribers in the last six years, from its peak of 100.12 million in 2011 to 87.22 million in the most recent estimates.” (Gaines) As a result, ESPN has been forced to layoff a large number of its employees. “ESPN laid off around 300 employees — many of them working behind the scenes — in October 2015. Then, in April [2017], the network cut roughly 100 jobs, with the reductions coming from ESPN’s stable of on-air talent and online

journalists.” (Bonesteel) Because of these challenges, ESPN has begun to increase their social media presence by constantly putting out highlights on Instagram and Twitter. They even now post short Sportscenter episodes on Snapchat. The company also developed the ESPN app as a source of sports news. They have expanded their podcast network by posting many of their on air shows as podcasts, and through the creation of programming such as 30 for 30 podcasts.

In addition to corporations such as ESPN, print news has been faced with challenges in attracting sports fans to more traditional modes of consumption as well. Sam Robinson used to work full time at St. Joseph News Press in Kansas City, but he noticed that all across the industry “positions were getting cut, wages were pretty stagnant, and the responsibilities just kept growing.” Now he’s a self described freelance writer, and works part time for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, along with the online sites Pro Football Rumors and Yardbarker. There are options out there for sports writers, but many have moved away from traditional newspapers. “The landscape changing has kind of benefitted me because...two of the main companies I work for couldn’t have existed 5 years ago...I got on with Pro-Football rumors, and that didn’t even exist until 2014” (Robinson). Writers are gravitating towards these online sites that are more convenient, provide broader coverage, and therefore have better opportunities to be profitable. For writers, “it’s an interesting time but it’s also a scary time because of all of the cuts being made...All of these really talented writers now all work at [the Athletic]...I don’t know that many people who still read print newspapers, which is unfortunate because this is some of the best reporting that’s ever been done but it’s done on dwindling resources.” (Robinson) Newspapers have been trying to make adjustments to maximize their profitability in the modern landscape by transitioning to online and making their content easier to access, but they have yet to find a reliable business model. “Back when I was getting into [writing] basically everything was free, and newspapers were wondering if they were making a mistake having the online content or free and making you pay for the print...a lot of the newspaper websites now cost money, they had it for free for ten years and now they’ve switched back to making you pay for it...it’s a self sustaining process” (Robinson) One of the main problems that newspapers have had is that sports fans have to pay for the whole bundle that is the newspaper, rather than just paying for the sports section. Some newspapers now allow subscribers to just subscribe to the sports section, but it has still been difficult to compete with the broad coverage and often free content of online sites.

Regardless of how newsprint and large media corporations adjust, it has become obvious that television news programs such as Sportscenter and traditional print papers will no longer be the primary way fans consume media. People want on the go, on demand, access to the sports media that they as individuals are interested in, and the outlets that deliver on this will be the ones that thrive.

Technology has allowed fans the opportunity to create content, interact with the sports community, and access the information they desire from anywhere. This has caused a significant amount of disruption in traditional sports media. As ESPN and typical print struggle to adapt, new media is emerging everywhere, whether that be from professional sites or via the common fan. The sports community is now more accessible and interactive than ever, and the means we have to communicate will only improve with new innovation. Following sports is no longer sitting in front of a TV screen waiting to see what will happen to be talked about next. The fans are driving this revolution, and they are benefitting from all the new innovations that have arisen. As new modes emerge with innovative developments in technology, fans will have even more power to engage with content on multiple levels. The way we follow sports will continually evolve, but as it always has, it will only strengthen our unwavering obsession for sports.

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