How Websites have impacted the sports journalism industry

By

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Introduction

The concept of a sports journalist starting an independent website, gaining an audience and establishing a brand with the website, and attracting a larger media company to purchase the business, has become a common practice. There have been instances where a website has sold at a low price, and there have been instances where the publisher of the website made a lot of money from the sale. This report will explain how this idea of independent sports websites came about, and why they are sold to a media business to further the gains of the website.

This report will discuss the overall transition from the focus of the printed newspaper to online. This topic is important because it offers clear guidance and understanding of how the sports journalism business, and the journalism industry, has transitioned from the printed newspaper to the web. This is important because journalism is how news is disseminated to the general public and how viewers see advertisements.

This report will examine examples of independent sports journalism websites founded by individuals, then discuss how they came to be purchased by businesses as well as the purchase benefits to both parties.

Literature Review

According to Barthel and Worden (2021), the total circulation of United States daily newspapers in 2020 was 25,785,036 on Sundays and 24,299,333 on weekdays. While print sports pages are in decline, many newspapers have either purchased or started online versions. “Many online journalism sites are associated with legacy media organizations” (Foust, 2005, p. 12).

According to Walker (2021), the number of newsroom employees dropped from 114,000 in 2008 to 85,000 in 2020. Watson (2023) in *Weekday circulation of the New York Times from*

2000 to 2022, stated, the print circulation in 1,000 copies was at 1,926.80 in 2013, and it dropped to 310 by 2022.

According to Watson (2023) in *Leading global English-language news websites in the United States in February 2023, by monthly visits*, the *New York Times'* website led the way in visits of news websites in the United States with 418,600,000 visits in February 2023.

Laucella, (2014), the author-journalist, writes, “Technology has influenced sports journalism’s development and growth in American society and has transformed how journalists and organizations work and report the news” (Laucella, 2014).

According to Westlund (2013), through the internet it is common for people today to have access to updated news at any place at any time. “In order to survive, they have developed omnipresence strategies. More importantly, after many years of online news publishing, the production and consumption of mobile news has gained a foothold in recent years” (Westlund, 2013, p.6).

In *Variety*, Dawn Ostroff, Spotify’s chief content officer said, “We look forward to putting the full power of Spotify behind *The Ringer* as they drive our global sports strategy” (Spangler, 2020, para.4). The sale price demonstrated that Simmons used the business to make a lot of money.

There are multitude of options for where Americans get their sports news. Only 20% of Americans rely on a single website for news but more people, more than half of Americans, in the U. S. visit between two and five websites daily (Cacciatore et al., 2012, p. 1040). “These findings suggest people in the US are not necessarily loyal to any particular news outlet, but peruse many outlets” (Cacciatore et al., 2012, p. 1040).

Theoretical Framework

The Uses and Gratifications theory focuses on what people do with media and their reasons for using media, including survey research asking about specific purposes of media use. According to Vinney (2019), the theory explains that people select the media they consume due to personal choice and motivation. There are two main principles the theory relies on: "Media users are active in their selection of the media they consume, and they are aware of their reasons for selecting media options" (Vinney, 2019, para. 6). The transition from the popularity of newspapers to the popularity of new online media parallels what people do with media and their reasons for selecting the media they consume.

Uses and Gratifications theory asserts that users are active and motivated in selecting the media they consume. "Uses and gratifications theory asserts that people use media to gratify specific wants and needs. Uses and gratifications sees users as active agents who have control over their media consumptions" (Vinney, 2019, para. 1). As the internet became more prominent in everyday use, people began to turn their attention to the online media. According to Shearer (2021), 86 percent of adults in America get their news from a smartphone, computer or tablet while 32 percent of adults get their news from print publications.

Another aspect of the Uses and Gratifications theory is "The greater control and choice brought about by new media has opened up new avenues of uses and gratifications research and has led to the discovery of new gratifications" (Vinney, 2019, para. 4). This can be related to how the internet became a part of the focus for sports media, new ideas and more areas of sports journalism, and journalism in general, was brought about. The internet influenced the development of sports journalism and so it brought additions, such as the websites: *Rivals.com*, *24/7Sports, On3.com*, *The Ringer* and *The Athletic*. According to Vinney (2019), new media offers more qualities that did not exist with older media, which brings more media content choices for users.

With increased media usage, scholars examined how users began to experience adverse effects in the long term. This investigation later came to be known as the Cultivation Theory. "The cultivation theory is a communication theory that examines the long-term effects of media exposure on individuals' perceptions of reality" (Das, 2023, para. 40). It asserts that individuals' beliefs, values, and attitudes are formed by continued exposure to media, particularly television. Cultivation theory posits that heavy exposure to media content gradually alters individuals' perceptions of social reality. (Das, 2023, para. 41).

As users continued to engage in online content, journalism increasingly cultivated an online presence, resulting in the transformation of the field from print to online reporting. The transition happened over time, leading to independent websites and newspapers augmenting websites.

Methodology

The purpose of this report is to explain the concept of independent sports websites and the transition of journalism transformation from the print newspaper to online distribution. Through thorough research and personal communication sources, the needed information was gathered.

After IRB approval, circulation numbers were gathered from the *Pew Research Center* during the time when the print newspapers were popular in 2000 and again for 2020 when print newspaper distribution was significantly lower. Articles addressing independent sports websites and those who invented them, their selling and how the sale improved the website were also reviewed.

Inside information on how and why the newspaper circulation declined was explained through personal communication phone calls with Tim McGuire and John Dille. McGuire also provided details into the independent sports websites and how ESPN has become superior because of its brand. McGuire and Dille are veterans of the mass communications business and are retired professors from the graduate school of journalism at Arizona State University. McGuire and Dille offer first-hand testimony of the transition from newspaper focus to web focus.

An example of one newspaper, *Kansas City Star*, transitioned its focus from the print newspaper to the web was given from Sam Mellinger, a veteran sports columnist who worked for the *Kansas City Star* from 2000 to 2020. The author spoke with Mellinger at a journalism and mass communications speaking event for experienced workers in the mass communications business addressing students and was in personal communication with Mellinger afterwards to discuss how the change impacted him as a writer and how the writers of the newspaper gradually switched the focus to the web. Mellinger's information provided significant assistance to the report. Riley Gates, current associate managing editor with O*n3Sports.com* and *On3Sports.com* national news desk, was also contacted through personal communication to discuss some advantages of the website businesses compared to newspaper beat reporting.

Vinney's (2019) article on the theory discusses more details and how they fit into the report. Along with all the research, gathering the information from scholarly articles and some websites was the right approach as the scholarly articles provided good background information and the websites provided examples and sources for points that are made. From this background, a thorough examination of the existing scholarship produced the following research questions:

Research Question 1) What factors have caused print journalism outlets to shift to online distribution?

RQ 2) What factors lead to independent sports website's founders selling out to legacy media outlets?

Discussion

This report discusses the history of journalism shifting from print to web focused distribution. Journalism is medium through with the public receives its news and how it views advertisements. Therefore, it is important for the journalism industry to understand the shift from print to web focus. How and why the shift from print to web focus and independent sports websites is discussed in this section. The shift has paved the way for the change of print journalism.

Sports Journalism

Sports journalism is transitioning from print newspapers to websites while newspapers are in a gradual decline. As mentioned in the Literature Review, according to Barthel and Worden (2021), the total circulation of United States daily newspapers in 2020 was 25,785,036 on Sundays and 24,299,333 on weekdays. While print sports pages are in decline, many newspapers have either purchased or started online versions. "Many online journalism sites are associated with legacy media organizations" (Foust, 2005, p. 12). Sports journalism websites are designed to draw an audience. Independent websites profit either as an advertiser-based model or a subscription-based model, both of which require attracting audiences. According to Scott (2005), "The most heralded source of competition for the traditional news providers came from the start-up, web-only news outlets. They attracted substantial numbers of users and a full complement of willing advertisers" (p. 95). Of the successful independent sports websites, a pattern exists where many have been sold to legacy media companies or media businesses. Examples of websites starting as independent, then sold to a larger, legacy media organization include *Barstool Sports*, *Bleacher Report*, *The Ringer*, *The Athletic*, *Rivals.com* and *24/7Sports.com*.

From the media business perspective, it is both more convenient and more time efficient to purchase a widespread independent sports website than to try to create a new one. Along with the purchase of the formerly independent websites, legacy media can attract new demographics and have further reach than the traditional newspapers and traditional media. Although many legacy media organizations still dominate online news production, independent sites are an important force as well. In general, sites associated with larger newspapers and the national television networks provide the most journalistic content, given their established news-gathering structures. (Foust, 2005, p. 12).

Findings

Barthel and Worden (2021) reported that in 2020, the total circulation of U.S. daily newspapers was 25,785,036 on Sundays and 24,299,333 on weekdays. Newspapers, such as the *Kansas City Star* have had to adjust to the falling circulation, and many papers, including the *Kansas City Star*, now offer both print and website editions of their content. In addition, some print journalism production is now solely based online. For example, ESPN's website, espn.com, provides both scores and beat reporting discussing sports. *The Athletic* is a sports journalism website, founded in 2016. Other websites for sports include *Yahoo! Sports* (sports.yahoo.com.), *The Ringer* (theringer.com) and *Barstool Sports* (barstoolsports.com).

Many journalists have either left their jobs or have been laid off from newspapers due to the decline of newspaper circulation. As newspapers' print circulation began to decrease, these news outlets needed to find some way to stay in business and remain relevant. "One of the most popular news websites in the United States, *The New York Times* has been known to achieve 70 million monthly visitors, outperforming three other big news websites: NBC News, The Washington Post and The Guardian" (Watson, 2023). As newspapers have declined and the weekly number of print days are declining, the news websites are increasing in relevance, including independent websites and those associated with legacy newspapers. But this aspect of the newspaper business has shown to maintain itself and avoid being overtaken by independent websites.

Online Impact

As mentioned in the Literature Review, Laucella, (2014), the author-journalist, writes, "Technology has influenced sports journalism's development and growth in American society and has transformed how journalists and organizations work and report the news" (Laucella, 2014). According to Laucella (2014), there has been strong development in the relationships of sports, media, technology and culture. As a result, the impact on the process of gathering and spreading information has been vital in the production of the tradition of journalism. For example, sports reporters are now able to contact sources for breaking news, confirm the breaking news with their editors and tweet out the breaking news to spread the information, trying to be the first to come out with the news.

Websites aim for increased subscriptions to maintain rapid growth for their website. "With the impact of steadily increasing financial pressures, the growing influence of the web is the second major factor driving the change of newsroom culture. Increasingly, the web today is seen as a newspaper's ally, not an adversary. It is helping sagging morale as newsrooms shrink" (Wormald, 2008, paras. 1, 6).

Many famous journalists still work at newspapers, but most of their focus is on the website, not just the printed edition. According to Robertson (2023, para. 1), the *New York Times* announced an upgrade to its revenue from the previous year on the digital-only. "The new subscribers bring the total number of paying subscribers to 9.6 million. The Times reported an adjusted operating profit of $347.90 million for 2022, a small increase from the previous year that beat the company's estimates" (Robertson, 2023, para. 5). This example shows that the *New York Times* increased its profit with the digital-only aspect to benefit the newspaper. As major newspaper publications, websites prospering, such as the *New York Times*, have been successful in maintaining their brand as they adjusted to the modern way of print journalism through websites.

Furthermore, the media's impact on sports has certainly helped the sports industry gain popularity. Television, radio and newspaper reporting have helped shape sports into the billion-dollar industry it is today. According to Lever and Wheeler (1993), mass media serves as the greatest influence on experience for sports in America. For instance, *Barstool Sports* was founded in 2003 by David Portnoy as a print publication. *Barstool Sports* offers coverage of college football and college basketball, Major League Baseball (MLB), National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL), Soccer, Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), Major League Soccer (MLS) and Professional Golf Association (PGA).

According to Belly Up Sports (2021, para. 2), *Barstool Sports* was first distributed in the Boston metropolitan area. It offered gambling advertisements and fantasy sports projection. It expanded and reached the internet in 2007. Portnoy received income from *Barstool Sports* to continue the business as the website continued to grow. In January 2016, Chernin Group bought 51% of the website (Belly Up Sports, 2021, para 5). According to *Variety*, 36% of Barstool Sports was then purchased by Penn Entertainment in 2020 for $163 million. Chernin Group's ownership stock was adjusted to 36%, too. In 2023, Penn Entertainment acquired total ownership of Barstool Sports, paying $388 million for the remaining shares it did not buy in 2020 (Spangler, 2023, para. 2). As *Barstool Sports* grew, leading to its sale to another business, the website stood as another publication of sports coverage. This example of *Barstool Sports'* brand illustrates the importance of branding for independent sports websites and newspaper websites to continue drawing an audience. Branding is the key to success for journalism businesses.

Moreover, the purchase of *Barstool Sports* by Chernin Group and Penn Entertainment allowed it to augment into a bigger business. *Barstool Sports* "has evolved into a leading digital player in sports, lifestyle and entertainment" (Spangler, 2023, para. 3). Portnoy, *Barstool Sports*' founder, says "Barstool Sports is bigger than ever and has become more than I had ever dreamed of" (Spangler, 2023, para. 5). According to Lieser (2018), *Barstool Sports* is attempting to win over large portions of the market without developing new techniques; being an independent writer as a fan while incorporating well-known aspects from journalism greats is a common practice that *Barstool Sports* is pushing for progress one article at a time.

Incorporating some methods and skills that have been in use by well-known journalists is part of the attempt *Barstool Sports* used at drawing an audience to establish a brand. Riley Gates, associate managing editor with *On3Sports.com's* national news desk, said he thinks websites have benefits over newspaper writing. “I think you get a chance to be more informal with your writing. I mean it as a good thing. Your content can be more creative, and you can do more unique writing styles, rather than just beat reporting that you read in a newspaper” (Gates, 2022). The creativity which websites allow in writing can help establish their own brand. Gates’ point illustrates how the websites can incorporate their own style of writing while maintaining journalism etiquette to create unique brands that attract more readership.

ESPN has been a well-known sports programming network since its founding in 1978. Dixon (2022) states, “ESPN was the most popular sports media company in the United States with 4.2 billion cross-platform actions on social media brand content.” ESPN has many dimensions now including ESPN +, ESPN 2, ESPNNews and ESPNU, as well as its website, espn.com, and offers coverage of all sports under its slogan is “The Worldwide Leader in Sports.” According to Encyclopedia Network, Inc. in “ESPN, Inc.” (2023) “The company continued to experience considerable growth in the new millennium.” In the 1990s, ESPN released espn.com and *ESPN The Magazine* to the general public. Then in the mid-1990s, ESPN augmented into a website. “Around 1995, www.espn.com was created and online articles were suddenly a reality” (Goldschmidt, 2019, p.3). *ESPN.com* worked to be the platform for all sports fans to get the coverage they were looking for and it seemed to fit the slogan of “The Worldwide Leader in Sports.” All the aspects led to the creation of ESPN’s strong brand.

Importance of Brand

The strength of the ESPN brand is an important example because many sports viewers go to ESPN for sports information regardless of who is doing the reporting. According to McGuire, Frank Russell Chair for the business of Journalism at Arizona State University, there have been cases ESPN has used its brand to save itself money. “What they have decided, is the brand is so powerful, that it doesn't make sense to have $10,000,000 talent when in fact with $2,000,000 talent, there won't be a big enough drop off, because they are ESPN" (McGuire, 2023). According to Cafardo (2016), Marc Stein was re-signed on October 5, 2016 to ESPN as a senior NBA writer with a prolific presence across ESPN platforms as the top national basketball reporter. According to former Sports Illustrated writer, Chris Chavez (2017), ESPN laid off Stein in April of 2017 despite Stein's hierarchy as ESPN's top national basketball reporter. The company decided to layoff Stein in order to not have to pay an employee so much money. Stein then joined the *New York Times*' staff to cover the NBA in October of 2017 (Chavez, 2017).

> They got rid of Marc Stein and a whole bunch of people that you would have thought were essential to the operation, and they weren't. So far, they have been pretty correct that they don't have to pay those high numbers to get an audience because ESPN's brand is so strong. Brand is as important as audience. They are related. Brand is the most important thing you have got. If you can build it over 20, 30, 40 years, then you are in the catbird seat. It is the brand and audience that will decide the future of media (McGuire, 2023).

According to McGuire's statement, the brand built is important to the success of journalism for creating these sports websites, and the brand ESPN has built has ESPN in a strong position. ESPN's brand has become so strong it can maintain its relevance despite not paying high-caliber journalists' big contracts, so ESPN may not be the best place to work for every journalist who seeks a prominent name in the business.

Websites with Legacy Media

Another example of the media's impact on the sports industry is *Bleacher Report*. *Bleacher Report* was established in 2005 and launched its website in 2008. "*Bleacher Report* was made by ‘four lifelong friends who were not satisfied by local coverage from their favorite sports teams.’ *Bleacher Report* began its life as a bare bones publishing platform with the intent of becoming a crowd-sourced content farm” (McKinney, 2017, p. 298). The original intent of the four co-founders of *Bleacher Report*: Bryan Goldberg, Dave Nemetz, Zander Freund, and Dave Finocchio, was to “cover as many teams as possible with as little paid staff as possible” (McKinney, 2017, p.298). According to Cohen (2010, para. 1), *Bleacher Report* was able to hire Brian Grey as the chief executive officer in 2010, after filling leadership roles at Fox Sports Interactive and *Yahoo! Sports*. According to Eskenazi (2013), *Bleacher Report* became a sudden success as it rose to become one of the three most-visited sports websites; the hierarchy success happened due to focusing on growing the website’s pageviews rather than producing quality content (p. 265). “The San Francisco-based site is an aggressively growing little giant, tapping the oceanic labor pool of thousands of unpaid sports fanatics typing on thousands of keyboards” (Eskenazi, 2013, p.265). According to Eskinazi, former contributor for *Forbes* (2016), *Bleacher Report* has achieved more than 60,000,000 unique visitors a month. “Since its founding less than a decade ago, Bleacher Report has been quickly climbing the digital ladder and garnering attention and accolades for its innovative approach to content and media” (Kwittken, 2016, para. 1). Rory Brown, president of *Bleacher Report* from 2016-2018, explains the approach to stories is about new and compelling things to draw the attention of sports fans that don’t just watch the highlights (Kwitten, 2016). Additionally, the growth of *Bleacher Report*, as it became the third most-visited sports website, was about the audience it drew based on growing the website’s pageviews. Establishing a brand through a different approach than traditional newspaper reporting benefited *Bleacher Report*.

Bleacher Report is still a very successful website offering coverage of college football, men's and women's college basketball, the professional sports leagues and coverage of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and MMA. It also covers U.S. Soccer teams, and NASCAR. The broad range of sports coverage offered for both collegiate and professional sports gives *Bleacher Report's* viewers plenty of coverage and attracts more eyes to the website.

The Ringer is an example of how a sports journalism website can be started by a single journalist and then sold to a media business for the benefit of both. For Spotify, a media music business, purchasing *The Ringer* was a way to add another dimension through a sports podcast. *The Ringer* features podcasts and articles for sports content, television shows and movies. "Spotify now owns programs related to sports, horror, and crime, as well as prestige series along with its celebrity-focused Spotify originals" (Carman, 2020, para. 2). Bill Simmons left ESPN to start *The Ringer* in 2016. The sports content includes coverage of NBA, NFL and many podcasts. Simmons was very successful with his podcasts on *The Ringer*. According to Shapiro (2020), Simmons was number 5 on Forbes' list of the highest paid journalists in the month of January in 2020. Eventually, Simmons sold *The Ringer* to Spotify in 2020 for $196 million (Spangler, 2020). According to Shapiro (2020), the sale occurred right before the pandemic; it was the time the industry had started to decline while media ad revenue collapsed. The sale price demonstrated that Simmons used the business to make a lot of money.

Simmons also was successful in building a brand for *The Ringer* through his podcasts, which allowed for the sale to Spotify to take place. According to McGuire, most start-ups have no intention of holding that company for 10 or 20 more years. "They start it up with a goal of selling the company and retiring to the Caribbean Islands. A lot of startup operations are all about getting the pay back from a payout" (McGuire, 2023).

Though local newspapers are struggling, the bigger newspapers of legacy media seem to buy the independent sports websites created by individuals, and it appears to benefit both as legacy media gains more traction and content and, the websites gain profit and become bigger. According to Fischer (2019), advertisements are the driving income force for sports websites, and they bring in $80 million-$100 million for a company. (Fischer, 2019). In 2012, *Bleacher Report* co-founder Finocchio sold to Turner Broadcasting Company. Once in the hands of Turner Broadcasting Company, it has grown into a network of sites. According to O'Toole (2012) David Levy, Turners' president of sales, distribution and sports at the time, said *Bleacher Report* "now compromises a network of more than 2,000 contributors writing on a variety of teams and sports topics. The company's editorial content is also syndicated to newspapers, including USA Today, The Los Angeles Times and The Baltimore Sun" (O'Toole, 2012, para. 6). This report discusses how and why newspapers went from a top-selling source of news to a dying breed. *Sports Business Journal* (2021) writes "AT&T is spinning off WarnerMedia, including its sports brands such Turner Sports and Bleacher Report, into a new company that it plans to merge with Discovery, Inc. to form a giant media company with extensive broadcast rights" (Lemire, 2021, para. 1).

Using internet technology, people have access to news and sports content online, giving websites ubiquitous status, ensuring that these websites thrive and making access to news easier. Mobile news allows convenient access by subscribers to subscribers on the sports websites and makes it easier for legacy media or businesses to buy the website. With sports websites, people can gain access anytime and anywhere with internet coverage with their laptop and or smartphone.

Yahoo! Sports, which offers sports coverage from sports journalists, is part of *Yahoo!* "Before Google or Facebook, Yahoo was the king of the internet" (Tynan, 2018, para. 3). *Yahoo!* bought other businesses to strengthen itself, but then was sold to another business itself. Sue and Pederson state "Yahoo! … spent $98 million to purchase Rivals.com to strengthen its fantasy sports services. With the explosive growth of technology, most major sports websites (ESPN.com, foxsports.com, sports.yahoo.com, cbssports.com) have begun providing various types of fantasy sports leagues" (Suh & Pedersen, 2010, p.78). Jeremy Ring, a top sales executive at *Yahoo!* from 1996 to 2001, says the biggest mistake *Yahoo!* made was prohibiting paid search ads from appearing alongside organic search results (Tynan, 2018). "For the first years of its existence, search results were considered editorial content, not to be sullied or diluted by advertising" (Tynan, 2018, para. 37). According to Tynan (2018), *Yahoo!* acquired Overture, which invented paid search advertising, for $1.6 billion in 2003 and became aware of its mistake. By then, Google was in the lead over them. After AOL was purchased by Verizon in 2015, Verizon bought *Yahoo!* in 2017, for a combined purchase price of $9 million. This scenario illustrates the importance of advertisements for websites and how one website can rise above others. Without advertising, websites continue to struggle economically. It also demonstrates how websites can become bigger by purchasing other websites, which helps grow a brand, subsequently leading to a larger audience.

Further, *Yahoo!'s* sale appears to recognize that joining Apollo Global Management, American private equity firm, would benefit the business and allow it to expand. Lee and Hirsch, reporters for *The New York Times,* write, "Yahoo and AOL, kings of the early internet, saw their fortunes decline as Silicon Valley raced ahead to create new digital platforms. Google replaced Yahoo. Yahoo used to be the front page of the internet" (Lee & Hirsch, 2021). Verizon sold

Yahoo! and AOL to Apollo for $5 billion. Guru Gowrappan, CEO of Verizon at the time, and later leader of *Yahoo!*, said that Apollo would allow *Yahoo!* to grow, because it gave Yahoo the investment and resources needed to elevate the business to the next level. (Lee & Hirsch, 2021). *Yahoo! Sports*, a part of *Yahoo!*, is an example of how a big news outlet can augment a sports website for more money to offer content for all readers and for a bigger outlet.

As the website business aspect of the sports journalism field has grown, three primary businesses now cover college sports: *Rivals.com*, *24/7Sports.com and On3.com*. All three of them compete directly, as their approach to adding subscribers is the same. *On3.com* is the newest of the three, founded in 2021. Terry was a co-founder of *Rivals.com* and founded *24/7Sports.com* as a subscription-based website when it was established in 2010. *24/7Sports.com* was purchased by CBS in 2015 which increased its success. After partnering with CBS Sports Digital for an exclusive advertising sales partner in 2013, the website profited more than $15,000,000 annually as it covered college and professional football and basketball. (Organ, 2015).

After his success with *Rivals.com* as a co-founder, Terry's sale to another media source signifies the importance of independent sports websites. Both are subscription-based websites that include advertisements. According to Gates, *On3.com* and *24/7Sports.com* are significantly ahead of *Rivals.com* as a whole. "So being with one of those two companies is more beneficial" (Gates, 2022). Terry continues to work with *On3.com*; it is yet to be seen how far he can take it and how much money the website will bring in. According to Gallagher (2021, para. 3), the first hire Terry made was Ivan Maisel as senior writer and the vice president of editorial. Maisel previously worked at ESPN since 2002 as their first college football writer until parting ways in January of 2021. Also, having created the three main websites intended to cover college football and men's basketball allows for more jobs for sports journalists. While Terry has made good money from selling the previous two websites: *Rivals.com* and *24/7Sports.com*, while now leading the way for *On3.com*.

The size of the audience and increase in media options has escalated, and media has been along for the ride. Just as athletes and coaches achieve fame and fortune because of sports consumers spending, it is the same with journalists, who get their money from newspaper subscriptions and people reading their content. "Virtually every surge in the popularity has been accompanied by a dramatic increase in the coverage provided sport by the media" (McChesney, 1989, p.49). Both the sports media and fan interest feed off each other and each grow as a result. As both aspects help cultivate one another, the media grows, drawing more sports websites, ultimately increasing the number of jobs, which then allows the sports websites to be created by individuals.

Print Newspaper vs. Web Publication

Newspaper coverage and website business coverage has an impact on the popularity of sports entertainment in society. There are multitude of options for where Americans get their sports news. As mentioned in the Literature Review, only 20% of Americans rely on a single website for news but more people, more than half of Americans, in the U. S. visit between two and five websites daily (Cacciatore et al., 2012, p. 1040).The multitude of websites also adds to the importance of websites being successful in establishing a strong brand, because viewers are now willing to view and read news from the multiple news platforms.

Newspapers used to be a sturdy business where journalists' writing focused on the print edition. The beginning of Mellinger's tenure at the *Kansas City Star* was marked by a focus only on the print edition, no thought given to the website. Mellinger also said that he thinks the website was intentionally updated after the newscasts, so content produced by the *Kansas City Star* wouldn't be stolen by the broadcasters. "Like all things the change was gradual" (Mellinger, 2022). As times changed, newspapers gradually moved toward the web and technology became more prominent. Mellinger's last 10 years at the *Kansas City Star*, the website first approach became very common. He states that he "was in a very distinct minority at the beginning of that timeframe, and in the majority toward the end" (Mellinger, 2022). This example of the digital approach has now become more popular with newsprint corporations.

Furthermore, print newspapers still exist. But there is intensive competition between print newspapers and website businesses. Both compete for subscribers, while offering different styles of coverage. Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune-37, a member of the Student and Guide Department of Journalism and Mass Communication writes, "The sports departments of news organizations with both newspaper and website publications have been affected considerably by the evolving demands on online journalism" (Hooda & Vasundhara, 2022, p. 1). Along with websites' impact on sports journalism, and journalism in general, there are certainly some positives for the website aspect of journalism. A transition came in the business for not only the journalists trying to make a living, but also for journalism's audience.

> The increased prevalence of online media sources such as blogs and news aggregating sites is changing the nature of news by allowing audiences to actively engage with media sources in new ways. This new convergent media culture is more participatory, with opportunities for individual members of the public to shape content. Content now appears in multiple media platforms and audiences engage with and access content in multiple ways (Cacciatore et al., 2012, p. 1040).

McGuire said "the web is where it is at" at this point of print journalism. (McGuire, 2022). He said it has been a long, slow death the newspaper industry has suffered. According to McGuire, industry leaders in the late 1990s thought the internet was going to help the business. He said, "we turned out to be dumb" (McGuire, 2022). The internet is what ended up being the demise of the print newspapers. According to McGuire, a very important aspect was more about eyeballs as newspapers always served up eyeballs. The problem that hurt the newspaper business model was the ads. The ads would generate the newspaper to 700,000 subscribers to a multiple on that and had the same number of eyeballs looking at ads. The web and online publications could be far more targeted. There was a big problem "that just changed the ball game" (McGuire, 2022). That is when consumers looked at an ad for real estate for an auto, were not aware who it was, and did not know if they wanted a house or a car. "Now you go looking for a car, you go to cars.com for Auto Trader or something in what they know is if you come to their site, they want a car, and you get their name and contact information. That changed the whole business" (McGuire, 2022).

Subscription-only model

As website businesses gained more traction, a recent attempt was made for an only subscription-based website. Alex Mather and Adam Hansmann founded *The Athletic* in 2016, a sports journalism website. The aim of *The Athletic* was to do business without any advertisements but only subscriptions. When sportswriter Andy McCullough joined *The Athletic* as an MLB writer in 2019, he wrote an article explaining the reason he joined *The Athletic* - it isn't clogged with pop-up advertisements. "You won't be disrupted by a video of me squinting into an iPad and recapping last night's game against the Mariners. You don't have to answer poll questions in order to read a story. You just have to pay" (McCullough, 2019). According to

Bryan Curtis, editor-at-large of *The Ringer*, the goal of *The Athletic* was to replace newspaper sports sections. Mather said in 2017, “We will wait every local paper out and let them continuously bleed until we are the last ones standing” (Curtis, 2022, para.1). According to Buzzelli et al. (2020), *The Athletic* was founded on the idea of income from subscriptions per month to provide in-depth coverage that you would not have in a traditional newspaper, and it acquired the incentive to win over the top talent from newspapers’ sports desk with increased job security and more flexibility for writing (Buzzelli et al., 2020,). *The Athletic* hired some prominent journalists in the business such as McCullough from the *Los Angeles Times*, Ken Rosenthal, a former field reporter for FOX Major League Baseball and others from newspapers in the attempt to beat out the sports sections of newspapers.

But *The Athletic* did not work out the way Mather and Hansmann intended when they started it in 2016. They ended up laying off writers during the pandemic in 2020, selling advertisements, and appearing happy to sell the publication to the *New York Times* to make advancements. In June 2020, *The Athletic* laid off about eight percent of its staff, 46 employees, as the pandemic shut down college and professional sports (Perez, 2021, para. 8). Just like other websites that were sold to another businesses for mutual benefit, *The Athletic* is the same concept. Sherman, Hansmann sold to The *New York Times* for $550 million. Sherman said it is a case where he and Hansmann simply got to know the *New York Times’* staff (Sherman, 2022, para. 5). According to McGuire, the *New York Times* bought *The Athletic* as a leverage point, and “they did not pay much money for it either in the greater scheme of things; the New York Times has believed in subscription-only operations, so we will have to see whether that works” (McGuire, 2023).

> And like I said back in 2020, The *New York Times* is the tip of the spear in journalism and subscriptions and really rethinking that bundle. And we got to know them. It really got us excited about the opportunity of the Times being a permanent home for The Athletic. A standalone brand within an incredible essential bundle. And we saw that as an opportunity to really push our agenda further and faster. This allows us to do what we can do best, which is sports writing, sports journalism, at an institution that is fully dedicated to that mission. As things go, you adjust plans, and you think about where and how you can achieve the mission of the company when you started (Sherman, 2022, para. 5).

McGuire was skeptical of *The Athletic's* success without advertisements (McGuire, 2023). Advertisements are key to websites' business because they provide money. Ryan Gilbert, staff member for *GoPowercat.com* on *24/7Sports.com*, said, "We make most of our money from ads. Not subs. So, it's a smart business plan" (Gilbert, 2020). *GoPowercat.com* is the website for *24/7Sports.com* for coverage of Kansas State sports. More than half of the content on *GoPowercat.com* is free. For the websites to gain advertisements, it needs to draw an audience. "If they have got an audience that is either a huge penetration of a small audience or solid penetration of a broader audience, advertisers are going to flock to them. It is all about the audience" (McGuire, 2023). According to McGuire, along with building a brand, websites will only be successful if they draw an audience. Drawing an audience is also a part of building the brand. *The Athletic* struggles to maintain an audience and sustain a strong brand, which led to Hansmann and Mather selling to the *New York Times*.

According to Dille, what is wrong with journalism is stations like CNN do not have journalists. They are posing as journalists, but that is now what the business model has forced the business to be, which is why journalism has pushed itself to the background to find audiences that can be converted to money at a later point in time. “That is really the core of the problem, the business model itself” (Dille, 2022). This issue was not always the case, though, with newspapers. Newspapers used to be the driving force of mass communications and the main source of news.

> If you put advertising revenue as a numerator, the denominator was two or three daily newspapers. Three television networks in the earlier days, and then a couple dozen radio stations. Those three categories, 80 % of the money back in the late 1960s, 75 % of the money was newspaper. If you got 75 % of every advertising dollar, you can fold it in. But that changed. As technology enabled more producers. Now, we got the internet, and everybody is a publisher (Dille, 2022).

This side of the spectrum on the transition of journalism shows how individuals such as the examples of the independent sports websites discussed, Simmons, Portney, Finocchio, Freund, Nemetz, Goldberg, Mather, Hansmann and Terry had the opportunity to produce the website they started.

Conclusion

Overall, with the development of technology, the business of print journalism has transformed. As Mellinger mentioned, the focus was all on the printed newspaper when he started with the *Star* in 2000 and was all on the website when he left in 2021. As the internet became a prominent platform, efforts that were discussed in the report were then made to start a sports website. *Barstool Sports* was founded in 2003 and *Bleacher Report* in 2005, and these websites were both then sold to a media business which helped the websites grow and gave the founders a profit. The websites need to draw an audience and need advertisements to make money along with subscriptions for a successful business. As websites continue as a component to the sports journalism business, the two main keys in their success are building a brand and drawing an audience. As McGuire said, it is the brand and audience that will decide the future of media (McGuire, 2023). It is about which websites are able to build a strong brand to be recognized by a vast majority of the general public to draw and maintain an audience will be the future of sports media.

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