

Access denied: an examination of sports journalism and college athletics through the lens of  
gatekeeping theory

by

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## **Abstract**

A phenomenon encompassing the access sports journalists are increasingly denied, when compared to how athletic departments have increasingly become more self-media-centric, is a unique and timely topic of study in the ever-growing space of media development in the digital age. In this master's report, I conducted interviews and a literature review within a small case study, using gatekeeping theory as a lens to view the relationship between journalists and athletic departments, with members of the media who cover Kansas State University Athletics and University of Kansas Athletics. The individuals interviewed included a diverse range of traditional media members and hybrid media members (individuals who utilize traditional and non-traditional media as a means of disseminating information) with the purposes of determining the reasoning for why athletic departments deny access to journalists, their perceptions on the relationships between athletic departments and journalists who cover them, and their methods for acquiring information when access is denied. All identifying information has been removed from the interviews to preserve ethical research integrity. Results included the emphasis on developing interpersonal relationships with Sports Information Directors (SIDs) who act as institutional gatekeepers, the need of diversification of information dissemination on the media level and literacy with social media methods, and the perception that media members who are increasingly denied access in favor of increasingly media-centric athletic departments need to shift their information dissemination methodology or be lost in the transition to the fully digital age. In this master's report, I provide recommendations on how to further study this phenomenon and to further develop the gap in the literature that is specific to this issue.

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## **Statement of Bias**

As a master's student at Kansas State University, I cultivated a strong passion for mass media and mass communications which has propelled a professional career in sports broadcasting. I have deep and lasting ties to Kansas State University, not only as an alumnus of the College of Arts and Sciences as an undergraduate student, but as a graduate student in the A.Q. Miller School of Media and Communication. I am also a legacy student at Kansas State and have been engaged with Kansas State Athletics as a fan since 1999. With these areas identified, it was important for me to secure my positionality within this research, as outcomes discovered could have implications towards my colleagues who actively cover Kansas State. As of the writing of this paper, I no longer am engaged in student media and only report on Kansas State athletics from a distance. The methodology for the study included in this document have allowed me to create a significant enough professional and academic distance from myself and any colleagues that I have worked with in the past that I do not feel it creates and kind of issues regarding known academic bias. However, it is important for me to provide a statement of transparency that I have worked with Kansas State Athletics in the past and have good friends who continue to cover Kansas State Athletics in their professional careers. This statement is my acknowledgment that I, to the best of my knowledge, possess no known areas of bias that would damage the academic neutrality of the research conducted within this master's report.

## **Introduction**

In the landscape of college athletics, a growing divide has presented itself between athletic departments at collegiate institutions and local sports journalists, due to athletic departments increasingly viewing themselves as both athletic and media/public relations departments. The simultaneous self-viewing of athletic bodies within the collegiate setting as both athletic and communications oriented, has generated an issue of power dynamics that negatively impacts sport journalism, and the watchdog nature journalism is generally expected to uphold (Dittmore, 2016). The purpose of this master's report is to examine the perception journalists have on the access they do or do not possess within their local collegiate athletics framework, using the lens of gatekeeping theory to assess the relationship between athletic departments and journalists and the information shared between the two entities.

## **Theoretical Framework**

For the purposes of studying the unique issue local media organizations face as athletic departments become increasingly self-media-centric, I will be using gatekeeping theory. Gatekeeping is the practice of controlling the flow of information through a metaphorical "gate" which is controlled by individuals known as "gatekeepers" (DeJuliis, 2015). Gatekeeping theory is used to study the processes behind the flow of information, what information is shared, and who it is or is not shared with (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). Originally applied by sociologists Kurt Lewin and David Manning White to study gatekeeping within journalism and legacy media such as television and print-based reporting, the study and application of gatekeeping and gatekeeping theory has been expanded to apply to the digital age (DeJuliis, 2015). For the purposes of this study, athletic institutions and related personnel within those institutions, rather than journalists or editors, are being considered the gatekeepers of the information that is supplied to members of

the media. While it is important to note that information passes through multiple gates within the gatekeeping process, and journalists/media organizations are often considered primary gatekeepers (Tandoc, 2018), we will be reviewing the role of athletic departments singularly as gatekeepers in this report.

## **Problem Identification**

As athletic institutions increasingly move toward generating and sustaining their own media presence, a gap in the literature reviewing the role that athletic departments play in the gatekeeping of information can be identified. Essentially one scholarly text exists on the specific issue, *College Athletic Departments As Media Organizations and the Regulation of Content: Issues for the Digital Age* by Stephen W. Dittmore (2016), and one master's report touches on a specific aspect of the issue, *The challenges of access to college athletes* by Chris Martucci (2021). Similarly, one article exists at the professional level detailing the specific issue of access to athletes in Australia, *Organizational gatekeeping in Australian sports journalism: A longitudinal study of three newspapers* by English et al. (2023). While a small selection of secondary texts can be found which point in the general direction of the same issue at collegiate level in the United States, no others specifically examine the issue of athletic departments as gatekeeping entities in the realm of sports journalism and communication. The issue at hand then can be characterized by the following statement, "As athletic departments becoming increasingly media-centric, local sports journalists are increasingly denied more thorough access to athletes, coaches, and administrators than they previously had." This master's report will provide literature that is related to the problem statement and would suggest a study to confirm or deny the identified problem statement using gatekeeping theory as a theoretical framework.



## Literature Review

To understand the issue at hand with how athletic departments are not only gatekeeping but bypassing local journalism by developing their own internal wing of content creation, one must take a greater understanding in how the landscape has changed institutionally and how the digital age has precipitated the shift from relying on local journalists to report information, to athletic departments becoming their own content creators.

### Evolution of Media-Based Athletic Departments

Dittmore, in his article *College Athletic Departments as Media Organizations and the Regulation of Content: Issues for the Digital Age* (2016), makes the argument that the digitization of the media landscape through social media has provided an avenue for athletic departments to bypass local journalists and tighten the grip on content that would have been previously outsourced to journalists – individuals who possessed, at the time, the only means of disseminating information on a large scale. With the invent of social media, the ability to not only provide information as a primary source, but also restrict information as the institutional barrier between the primary source of information and the public, has not been lost on athletic departments (Dittmore, 2016, p. 713). This shift in the power to restrict the ebb and flow of information has caused a rift between athletic departments and local journalists, based primarily on a fundamental idea that, like other state institutions (such as state governmental bodies), state-funded universities should not be in control of their own media reporting as that represents a significantly biased perspective that is not obligated to be transparent in the ways that journalists traditionally seek transparency. Athletic institutions counter with the argument that they are providing a media-centric product to fans while simultaneously protecting their property rights within the context of college athletics (Dittmore, 2016, pp. 713-714). This argument has been, in

some ways, backed up by the greater focus that has been placed on the “brands” that represent athletic institutions and their importance at a regional, national, and even international level, especially when paired with Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) and the role that has begun to play in the continued relevance of athletic institutions at the collegiate level (Haynes, 2022).

Reporter Wally Hall wrote in an article for the Arkansas Democrat Gazette concerning the issue of athletic institutions becoming their own media organizations that,

“Not one radio station, not one TV station, and not one newspaper is happy that the UA [University of Arkansas] has locked them out of practices and has restricted access to players and coaches while giving IMG free rein... The University of Arkansas is a state institution with the same rules and regulations as any other institution. Would you want all the news out of the governor’s office to come from his website?” (Hall, 2013)

Athletic departments have proposed that the development of a media-centric athletic department within an academic institution is a strategy for supplementing traditional media. Former University of Arkansas Athletic Director Chris Freet was quoted saying,

“...[it] identif[ies] where we can be unique and where we can fill a void left by the traditional media...[W]e can offer expert opinions and more behind-the-scenes access while providing a greater level of consistent engagement... Most coaches don’t want outside media covering their practices and potentially giving away game plans, but they don’t mind if we’re there.” (Read, 2015, as cited in Dittmore, 2016)

### **Who is the Gatekeeper Now?**

Where lines become fuzzy between journalists and athletic departments, is that a new level of gatekeeping information has been added to the mix. Journalists, who were accustomed to

being the primary gatekeepers of information in the pre-digital age, now find themselves competing through different gates and handling information from new gatekeepers who have the power to frame things in their own ways and set their own public agendas around all types of content (Dittmore, 2016, p. 716). Where journalists continue to have a leg up on the average individual who disseminates information through digital means is the training to evaluate sources using journalistic criteria such as credibility, knowledge, willingness to provide information, timeliness, and the relationship with the source (van der Meer et al., 2017). In this way, journalists remain important and relevant in the gatekeeping of information, not just from athletic institutions, but in news reporting overall. Yet, social media and the digitization of media has thrown a wrench into the machine regarding traditional gatekeepers and gatekeeping practices.

Shoemaker (2020) suggests that the digitization of media has taken what has been a traditionally linear gatekeeping process within mass media as an industry and a practice, and added branches to that originally linear process. Gatekeeping now involves interactions between journalists, social media users, and “supra-gatekeepers” such as social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, that conduct their own level of gatekeeping of information that is distributed into the digital ether by individuals who are also making gatekeeping decisions (Shoemaker, 2020). Shoemaker continues by proposing that the overall gatekeeping system, which now must include considerations towards traditional mass media, social media, and supra-gatekeepers, should be viewed beyond just individual media as it had before the implementation of social media as a news-dissemination source.

Similarly, journalists are met today with a two-edge sword when reporting news, not just sports-related news, in that to compete with individual gatekeepers/social media users and to operate within the framework of supra-gatekeepers as suggested by Shoemaker (2020),

journalists are increasingly needing to use social media to market themselves and their stories to develop a wider audience base as traditional media begins to shrink (Gagliano, 2018). Gagliano proposes that journalists have increasingly found the need to develop online personas for themselves, promote transparency and media literacy, and have a new need to increasingly consider reader/engager feedback as a part of a new hybrid role that lies in the grey area between traditional gatekeepers and PR marketers. This then calls for a potential shift and or rebrand of gatekeeping theory as it pertains to a digitalized media landscape (Gagliano, 2018) – especially as it pertains to the role athletic departments play within the context of gatekeeping information when they possess their own social media platform to disseminate institutionally controlled content and bypass more traditional journalistic gatekeepers (Dittmore, 2016).

### **Athletic Departments or Media Organizations?**

In his seminal article on the subject, Dittmore (2016) states,

“Conventional wisdom would suggest college athletic departments are not professional media organizations, but an argument can be made that athletic departments engage in the activity of journalism through journalistic-style content published on departmental websites and social media platforms, similar to blogging. Indeed, one can argue technological changes have enabled an individual or organization to behave in a manner consistent with citizen or grassroots journalists, whose rise has been well-documented.”  
(p. 718)

In a separate article written by Dittmore for [athleticdirecturu.com](http://athleticdirecturu.com) titled, *The Constantly Changing World of Media Content in College Athletics* (2016), he finds that athletic departments are increasingly viewing themselves as media outlets, using the University of Notre Dame as an

example. At the 58<sup>th</sup> Annual Chicago/Midwest Regional Emmy Awards, Notre Dame won two Emmys for their Irish Media and the way that they have been creating and distributing content. Dittmore notes that this is an example of how athletic departments are becoming so sophisticated in their production techniques, that they are beginning to rival traditional media outlets (in this case, television studios) for high-level production value, making the need to engage with traditional media outlets far less pressing (Dittmore, 2016). Dittmore goes on to explain that athletic departments find themselves increasingly desirous to generate content that provides behind-the-scenes access to the athletic department, as that is the kind of content that patrons of athletic institutions are wanting to engage with. What would have once required giving local journalists access to behind-the-scenes information can now be done in-house, for the sake of not only convenience, but also with the option to bypass providing access to anyone that the athletic department does not want to work with. Regarding the access that is increasingly dwindling in the relationship between media outlets and athletic departments, Dittmore says, citing an article written by Kevin Schnepf (2016) entitled *NDSU limits some media access to Bison Athletics*,

“North Dakota State University provided a more recent example of these restrictions this past summer [2016]. Media complained when the Bison athletic department announced access limitations for non-rights holding media. While these restrictions were quickly rescinded, the fallout provided evidence of the problems which can occur when a state institution restricts access for mainstream media, while simultaneously generating its own content.”

Dittmore also references an article written for the *DePaul Journal of Sports Law and Contemporary Problems*,

“Typically, a state actor may not deny access to one member of the media while granting access to another.” (Calzada, 2010, p. 42, as cited in Dittmore, 2016)

Dittmore closes his thoughts by noting that mainstream media advocates continue to argue that reduced journalistic access in favor of self-generated institutional media coverage lessens the ability for traditional journalists to retain their “watchdog” label of journalistic integrity.

Dittmore, in concluding his article for [athleticdirector.com](http://athleticdirector.com), is careful to assert that, “...sport consumers need to be media literate enough to discern whether the opinions and facts they are reading about their favorite team are written in a manner which provides for multiple points of view.”

## **Methodology**

To facilitate the qualitative research experience, I have generated four research questions that are based on the identified research problem between athletic institutions and journalists, viewed through the lens of gatekeeping theory. From there, I have created two data collection questions per research question to facilitate the gathering of research data. The eight questions based off the four presented research questions are what were asked of research subjects during the study:

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1:** How frequently are reporters denied access to athletes/coaches/administrators for interview?

**RQ2:** Why are reporters denied access to athletes/coaches/administrators for interview?

**RQ3:** How are local sports journalists adapting their practices and strategies to navigate the more restrictive media environment created by athletic departments?

**RQ4:** How have the changing media dynamics between athletic departments and local sports journalists impacted the quality and depth of sports coverage in local media?

### **Research Procedures**

To fully study the application of gatekeeping theory to the identified problem, I have utilized the qualitative research technique of a case study. A case study works well for this particular phenomenon in communication as it allows me to define the parameters of the case, utilize data from a variety of different sources such as interviews, observations, documents, etc., and to tease out specific themes that may or may not confirm the proposed problem that I have identified above (Rashid et al., 2019). Of particular interest is the interviewing of local journalists to determine their experiences when vying for information from collegiate athletic institutions.

### ***Participant Procedures***

A project of this nature could quickly become of such a large scope that it becomes insurmountable. Currently in the United States, there are 363 NCAA Division I athletic institutions alone across 49 states (ncsasports.org, n.d.). When factoring in the large number of local journalists that are covering one program, let alone 363 programs, potential candidates for interview expand into the tens of thousands. For this project then, I chose the study of journalists in the state of Kansas who are covering the two Division I institutions in the state, Kansas State University and the University of Kansas. My goal was to interview four journalists, two from Kansas State, two from Kansas, who cover the institutions full time and exclusively. By

providing these parameters, the pool of available journalists shrunk considerably, and I was able to only acquire three of the four intended interviews before running out of willing participants who met the parameters of the study. All the journalists selected represent a wide range of media development, from digital media to print media, radio and television to YouTube content, and attempt to exist in both traditional and non-traditional formats when reporting their sports news. This was imperative in the selection process, as it helps provide context for the digitization of media and the way that traditional sports journalism has needed to shift to stay relevant when compared to the long and powerful arms of athletic institutions and their own media generation departments/methods. Two of the participants have covered Kansas State extensively for at minimum three years, while the other participant meets the same criteria for the University of Kansas. All have significant professional experience in covering athletic institutions as journalists.

To preserve academic integrity for this study, my precise selection of individuals who cover one institution exclusively and on a full-time basis also allowed me to engage with individuals that I know at the colleague-to-colleague level. However, I have never worked with any of the participants in any formal or informal ways beyond the pleasantries exchanged in passing. I possess this surface level relationship with the participants who cover Kansas State. I did not know the participant who covered the University of Kansas. I personally contacted each participant through instant messaging to ask them to participate in the study. They were given the option to decline and or withdraw from the study at any given point. I conducted each interview through a video conferencing program called Riverside.fm, a tool that is similar to Zoom in design, but possesses stronger technical abilities to record interviews, most notably, a transcription service using built-in AI. The transcription created for Appendix A comes from this



service and was personally edited by myself in real time after listening back to the conducted interviews to ensure accuracy. Each interview conducted was approximately 30 minutes in length, and all corresponding files have been saved to an encrypted external hard drive, the contents of which will be destroyed by Kansas State's IT department upon final approval of this report.

### ***Data Procedures***

While data saturation for research of this qualitative nature is usually recommended (Fusch & Ness, 2015), for the scope of this report, I intend to take initial interviews and, based off the results, make recommendations toward a larger project that could be conducted as a study, a dissertation, or some other larger research project. I will continue to use the standard research methodology: introduction, problem statement, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion, but simply have a smaller sample size due to the nature of the requirements for this master's report.

## **Findings**

To provide a concise scope of the undertaken study, I have provided my findings below based off the research questions that were asked of the participants. To preserve anonymity and comply with ethical research requirements, I have removed all information that could identify the participants.

### **RQ1a: What are the most common scenarios or events where reporters experience denial of access?**

Participant responses for this research question included access denial based on perceived credibility, relationship with sports information directors (SIDs), and the environment for which

individuals would potentially be denied access, such as road games where media availability is limited due to being the away team, and after losses when players and coaches are less inclined to speak to members of the media. Of note, one participant indicated that with the way that media has become much more digitized and influencers/content creators are reaching such a wide platform, individuals can now, "...start up a podcast and really the secret goal of the podcast is just get into football games free, so it's, it's a much more hazy process now." This finding is of particular interest, because it speaks to the digitization of media and the diversification of how media is disseminated, but also leans into the introduction of multiple gatekeepers in a less linear process than what it was previously, as noted by Shoemaker (2020). SIDs and athletic departments now need to take into account perceived credibility, but also multi-media reach, with participants indicating that the better the relationship one personally has with an SID, the more likely you are to be credentialed for athletic events when you lack what was previously a traditional form of "credibility," such as being a beat-writer or being one of the few exclusively covering an institution at the local level.

**RQ1b: Are there any specific policies or guidelines set by athletic departments that outline the conditions under which access can be denied?**

Participants responded to the question in a fairly nonchalant way, with one participant noting that they do not even pay attention to what the official guidelines are because of the relationships they have built with the athletic department they work with, as well as a depth of personal credibility due to their volume of work done covering their athletic institution, saying, "To be honest, I no longer even bother reading them because I'm so established I can kind of get in almost anywhere. I couldn't apply to, since I cover college athletics, I couldn't just jump in and try to do NFL or anything, but anything I need access to, I'm granted. And part of that is, there's a

layer here where if you're, if you're applying for visiting media, the visiting media sports information director, the gatekeeper of those credentials will check with the person that handles you on your home turf. So I'm always verified through that no matter what.” Common themes from the participants included:

1. A general lack/disinterest of knowing what the official policies are and using common sense and experience as a guide for acquiring information.
2. Building relationships directly with SIDs, so that when a journalist wishes to cover a specific event or a specific item within the context of the athletic department, SIDs either grant or deny access, providing journalists with a concise direction to move in based on the access grant or denial.
3. Expectations are generally outlined by athletic departments at the beginning of seasons, and some athletic departments cross verify journalists are who they say they are at the SID level between institutions.

Generally, the findings for this question indicate that journalists are expected to make requests of SIDs which are either confirmed or denied in terms of access, and loosely refers back to the RQ1a concept that, the better the relationship one personally has with the SID of the sport you are covering within the athletic institution you are covering, the better your chances are at getting information from the athletic department.

**RQ2a: What reasons do athletic departments typically provide for denying access to reporters?**

Responses from participants was mixed on this particular question, with one participant indicating that in their experience, athletic departments cite that they do not have enough room to

accommodate journalists that are on the road covering athletic institutions at away games, when in reality they do have enough room but did not feel inclined to credential opposing media members. However, this participant did say that they do not see much of this practice anymore as it is less common than it has been.

Generally, responses did indicate that there are a number of reasons as to why athletic departments deny access to journalists, with most of them being fairly non-descript in nature and reasonable, and some are less descriptive and perhaps even purposefully vague. One participant likened the relationship of a journalist and an athletic institution to that of one between a parent and a child,

“It’s, it is almost like a very parental relationship. Like the athletic department is the parent and sometimes the reporters are the children, where, you can have all these questions, some valid, or some really stupid, and they can tell you no because they said so. And that’s kind of just how you have to deal with it at times.”

**RQ2b: How do reporters perceive the transparency and fairness of the access denial decisions made by athletic departments?**

Responses from participants on this question was generally aligned in that, often athletic departments and SIDs make decisions that hinder access, but the way in which access is hindered determines how journalists respond to the situation. SIDs that are courteous and provide quick responses – whether positive or negative – are generally viewed favorably, while SIDs that do not provide responses or are discourteous to media are generally viewed negatively. Again, access is referenced as being contingent on individual journalist/media organization-to-SID relationships and the perceived credibility of the individual/media organization that is attempting

to gain access to information that is not readily available. Generally, participants voiced skepticism about some of the reasons provided by athletic departments and SIDs for denying access, but realize that there is ultimately little they can do to acquire access after it has been denied by an institutional gatekeeper. One participant elaborated saying, “I don't know, I think sometimes there's a little bit of skepticism. I think sometimes a little bit of skepticism, a little bit of frustration from time to time.” Another participant commented saying that for some, it just doesn't matter,

“Well, all those reporters of importance don't give a crap because they're in. It's one of the interesting things about the profession. The old school folks in more traditional media still feel as if their value exceeds all other values. When we know in the marketplace and in the real world, it doesn't any longer.”

**RQ3a: What alternative methods are sports journalists using to gather information when access to athletes/coaches/administrators is denied?**

This particular answer received three distinctly different responses on methods used to acquire information when gatekeepers purposefully close the gates on journalists attempting to gain access to information. However, the general theme of their responses hinged significantly on the interpersonal relationships built with individuals inside and outside of the programs in question, who can provide insider knowledge. Responses ranged from building relationships with athletes/recruits directly before they are officially under the purview of an athletic institution, building relationships with parents/family/friends of athletes who might be willing to share insider information, building relationships with individuals within athletic departments who are “in the know” and can provide information when perhaps others could not, and identifying gray areas where detailed insider information about athletic institutions can be gleaned from people or

organizations who are not directly affiliated with the athletic institutions in question, but are rather indirectly affiliated by being well connected to the areas which journalists are attempting to cover. One participant elaborated on potential individuals who sit on the periphery just outside of the reach of institutional gatekeepers that can be useful to reporters,

“I mean, in our part of the industry, it's a lot of relationships that are built with like parents, or maybe, you know, past coaches of a player, or somebody else that might have a connection there. Boosters of the athletic department are also ones, because most of the time those people are more along the sides of what you're looking for. Because they, you know, typically when you're looking for this kind of information, it's not positive, or at least it's, there's a lot of cloudiness with where it sits. So they want, they're like you, they want all the information they can get.”

These interpersonal relationships are the key to acquiring information that is denied through the traditional method of speaking directly to athletic departments/SIDs and asking for statements or information which they are not obligated or feel inclined to give.

**RQ3b: How has the use of social media and digital platforms influenced the way local sports journalists report and engage with their audience in this restrictive environment?**

Participants responded to this question by identifying that, in today's digital landscape, generating credibility beyond just what you are obligated to create through the content that is expected of you is of key importance. Social media is now the powerful sword that can be wielded by both journalists and athletic departments. On one hand, it gives athletic departments the power to provide their own, original content that is not required to be free of institutional bias, and on another, it provides journalists with the ability to generate credibility from non-

traditional media and be in the position to potentially create as much engagement as social media content from athletic institutions. Certainly, while athletic institutions possess a leg up on generating more engagement from a social media perspective due to the inherent credibility and reach that is developed through official institutional social media channels, journalists also view social media as a great equalizer that can work in their favor just as much as it works in the favor of the athletic institution they are covering, making social media a powerful and imperative tool to develop literacy with in the digital media age. One participant noted,

“...you can create credibility in such non-traditional ways now. I mean, they might say, ‘Look, you're from a podcast. We're not, we don't typically, you know, allow podcasters in,’ and then they check your Twitter and you've got 20,000 followers or more. There's some weight to that that they can't ignore. And also, the moment you say, well, ‘University of Blah has denied me access and here's a guy who did it,’ that guy has a tough day or two with social media getting overrun. So there is kind of a bully pulpit now to being on social media that has aided some and also made it very understandably foggy in who is actually media and who's just someone that maybe people like their tweets.”

In a different vein, one participant noted that because of social media, SIDs and athletic departments can sometime correctly predict trends in which reporters might go and create ways to mitigate those narratives,

“It's interesting to see how SIDs predict what effect reporters' actions might have on the public when it comes to social media and kind of try to preempt certain reactions by discouraging reporters from putting something out on social, usually for good reason.”

**RQ4a: What are the perceptions of sports journalists regarding the current quality and depth of their sports coverage compared to previous years?**

Participants responded to this question by noting the shift from traditional media and journalism to digitized, hybrid digital/traditional media reporting, and how older members who were front-runners in traditional media methods feel slighted because of the way that people with less perceived credibility can outperform and out-engage traditional media outlets through digital methods. With that shift, one participant noted that, in their experience, the movement from less traditional media outlets has caused a general lack of objectivity in the field. This participant said,

“I think right now we're seeing a pretty big... I don't know if it's a shift, but... I think it's both sides, so I think... for the media themselves, we're seeing them shift into being more like... unapologetically, ‘hey, I'm for this because I have this connection to it, I'm not going to be bashful about it anymore.’ And so in turn, I do think that... some people will take that and think that they can't be objective and they can't give you something at face value anymore. And some people think that's a good thing. Like, in the space that I'm in right now, a majority of the people there probably appreciate the more friendly spin that it will get from some people.”

Another participant considered the effect that the Covid-19 pandemic had on the way that the shift from traditional to less-traditional reporting took shape,

“...I can definitely see the effects of like the pandemic. In many ways, I think the pandemic led to a significant lessening of access that wasn't... restored in a lot of ways when pandemic restrictions loosened. But yeah, I think there's a perception, particularly



for more experienced reporters, that things were different in the good old days. And I think they have some reason there in talking about...”

**RQ4b: How have audience engagement and feedback changed in response to the evolving dynamics between athletic departments and local sports journalists?**

Participants responded to this question by teasing out two major themes:

1. The importance of utilizing digital media in tandem with the growing desire to engage with digital content, especially through podcasts and YouTube.
2. The general misconception of how the media functions by the average individual who engages with media content, and the perceived access content consumers think journalists have, when in reality, content creators have less access to inside information than ever before.

Of particular interest in their responses to this question was the idea that content consumers think that reporters are granted much more access to athletic departments and behind-the-scenes activities than they actually are. One participant described an interaction with a content consumer that highlights that misconception,

“And so one of the areas that I would say we used to get this complaint like every couple of weeks and it made me laugh especially last season somebody would ask a question about the basketball team and about some you know random guy, end the bench, that has not played, will not play. It's very clear that he's just probably not good at basketball and they would ask well, ‘what's going on here? How's he been looking in practice?’ and it's like I could not tell you how he's looked in practice. I have not heard a single coach or player say his name. So that's probably not a good thing. And then there are just, you will sometimes get response

like, 'Well, shouldn't you be going to practice and watching?' And it's like, that's not how this works. And so you can explain to them numerous times, like I can't just shoot an email and say, 'Hey, two days from now, you cool if I come watch practice?' Like, no, that's not how this works. But I think fans and people that take in the media, they see the access and they think, 'oh, it's unlimited.' And in reality, they don't understand when it is kind of reined in and how much it works. And so I think you do kind of get negative responses from that sometimes because they think you should know everything.”

Similarly, one participant noted the importance of being able to capitalize on the opportunities where one does get the access they request on finds themselves getting more information than they had been trying to find in the first place,

“But yeah, I do think that deeper and more and better sourced writing gets a better response from audiences, obviously, but I think in terms of like the general day-to-day beat reporting, I don't think people really notice whether you have a one-on-one interview or something that comes out of a media availability even. Unless it gets into really personal and in-depth stuff. So, you've got to get that personal and in-depth stuff to make it count when you have a one-on-one opportunity. And those one-on-one opportunities can be rare. So, on the whole, I think that sometimes it can be hard to know just how valuable access really is because you don't know how much your audience will react to or care about it.”

## **Discussion**

In synthesizing the results of this case study using the interviews conducted, in tandem with the literature review provided, it is my belief that, despite the growing divide between

athletic departments and journalists and the access granted or denied by the SIDs, interpersonal relationships remain more key than ever before when journalists are searching for insider information. Michael Walsh notes in his master's thesis entitled *Media Members' Expectations of a High-Quality Sports Information Director* (2017) that, SIDs serve as liaisons between members of the media and the academic institutions that they represent, and that in this role, SIDs control the distribution of information about their athletic institutions and how that information is shared with the media and the general public. In this way, we would then view an SID as a primary gatekeeper that stands between the media and the public and the inner workings/insider information found within athletic departments. Interpersonal relationships, the development, and most importantly the maintenance of those relationships, is the key to receiving more access than what was previously granted when examining the findings of the small study conducted for this master's report. This is consistent with literature provided on the generalized relationship between individuals looking to acquire information, and the gatekeepers that allow or deny access to the desired information (VoxusPR, 2013; Shoemaker, 2020; Bartnick, 2023). In this way, Manca (1999) suggests that journalists themselves can be considered both as gatekeepers and gate-openers as they establish relationships with gatekeepers that are providing or denying them information. In this way, the establishment of a relationship with SIDs as local journalists, whether one exists in the traditional media landscape, the hybrid media landscape (both traditional and non-traditional), or the non-traditional media landscape is one of the more significant undertakings that can be done to access information that might not have been previously available. Similarly, respecting the boundaries between the gatekeepers and the gate-opener is of utmost importance, as it requires a level of trust that can be easily broken (VoxusPR, 2013; Bartnick, 2023).

In this way, the general key as a sports journalist requires that positive interpersonal relationships be built not only with SIDs, but with individuals inside and outside of the immediate scope of the institution one is covering. It's no secret that sports journalists rely on gatekeepers of all kinds of information, whether they be institutional gatekeepers (such as SIDs), interpersonal gatekeepers (such as parents/donors/etc.), or even the so-called "supra-gatekeepers" as Shoemaker (2020) suggest (i.e., social media platforms themselves like Facebook or X [formally known as Twitter]), to find important information that provides the necessary context to accurately report on information that is not easily accessible or has had access denied to it. In that is the understanding that a positive report between gatekeepers and gate-openers give journalists the necessary primary materials to make not only timely reports, but include accurate information to assert accurate claims (Chron, 2021; Hall et al., 2022) This relationship then allows for a mutually beneficial information flow between different parties based on credibility and rapport (Chron, 2021; Cheng, 2023).

### **The Role of Social Media**

Within the context of interpersonal relationships there must be noted the massive importance that the digital age has brought with the development of hybrid and non-traditional media reporting. Based on the responses from the small study in this master's report, the value of utilizing both traditional and non-traditional platforms as a member of the media is paramount to retaining relevance and attempting to keep up with the institutional advantage gained by individual athletic departments and their own social media/content creation departments. Yet, as Dittmore (2016) indicates, athletic departments will naturally possess an advantage in this realm despite the free-for-all landscape in which social media reporting exists. Muellerm (2020) argues that social media still reflects mass media power structures, being driven and influenced by

capitalistic tendencies and power motives that were once the driving force behind traditional media and are what continue to drive growing forms of non-traditional media today. Yet, the professional perspective of journalists in the field remains, social media is a necessary tool that must be utilized, or one must prepare to be left behind as the hybrid and non-traditional media/content creators take over and replace traditional media outlets, for better or for worse.

### **Potential Legal Considerations**

All throughout his authoritative article on the subject of media access or denial, Dittmore (2016) highlights a potential snag where athletic institutions can be held liable for denial of information to reporters due to their role as so called, “state actors” (p. 720). This legal definition applied to athletic institutions can then allow for reporters who are denied information, especially as topics become more sensitive in terms of public relations, to invoke First Amendment rights (or discrimination against their First Amendment rights) and potentially gain information through official legal and American constitutional avenues. Dittmore highlights that, “...college athletic departments are required to consider due process when creating policies, procedures and rules” (2016, p. 720). Dittmore further elaborates on the legal technicalities involved, noting,

“...the reasons for athletic departments to limit media access to, say, football practice, vary from competitive advantage to revenue considerations. However, ‘the interests of public relations and raising revenue are not compelling [government] interests...[to invoke] the First Amendment.’ (LaVoi & Calhou, as cited in Billings & Harden, 2014, p. 320, 320-330, as cited in Dittmore, 2016, p. 720). By applying time, place, and manner tests, courts have developed fairly clear guidelines for these restrictions in public places (Teeter & Loving, 2018, as cited in Dittmore, 2016, p. 720). These ‘restrictions may be

upheld as lawful if they are [administered] even[ly] and do not favor some kinds of content over other[]' content (Teeter & Loving, 2018, as cited in Dittmore, 2016, p. 720).

From there, Dittmore acknowledges the elephant in the room by noting that there are currently no guidelines that are in place legally to provide context for cases involving access, and that, under current legal understanding, if academic institutions are generating content that is not available to traditional media, that they themselves might be legally considered media outlets, creating a serious conflict of interest with First Amendment legal ramifications as they cannot be both state funded actors and media organizations (Dittmore, 2016). The legal ramifications for this potential finding are, admittedly, well beyond the scope of this master's report, but an acknowledgement of the potential legal case reporters have should state-funded academic/athletic institutions be legally considered media outlets at the same time, is of great significance in finding a way to level the playing field in favor of local journalism.

### **Proposed Recommendations for Further Study**

Upon conclusion of this report, I have found that the perceptions around the acceptance and denial of journalists to access information in the institutional collegiate athletic landscape is greatly determinate upon three concepts:

1. The relationship between individual journalists/media organizations and athletic SIDs is the key to acquiring more sensitive information.
2. The current landscape of the generalized relationship of an athletic department and the individuals/media organizations that are covering that athletic department (whether it is generally positive or negative).

3. The need for traditional journalists to engage with hybrid/non-traditional methodologies to keep up with athletic departments that are increasingly moving away from traditional journalistic access since they can create their own content at their own discretion within their own narrative.

For the purposes of continuing the study of this topic, I would recommend a qualitative study that encompasses interviewing traditional journalists (i.e., individuals who work exclusively in print, television, or radio and who generally reject multi-media/digitalized media as a means of disseminating information), hybrid journalists, and non-traditional journalists/content creators and the relationships that these individuals have with the athletic departments they are attempting to cover. As the scope of this project would be quite extensive, I recommend beginning at the conference level and interviewing one of each (as can be found) of traditional, hybrid, and non-traditional journalists/content creators per school within a given conference. For example, this would look like three interviews per school for the Big 12 Conference to determine trends between the three types of journalists/content creators and the access they are granted or denied. Are traditional journalists still relevant? How do hybrid journalists develop their techniques to keep a foot in both the traditional and non-traditional media worlds? How is credibility determined for a non-traditional media content creator who is driven by views, clicks, and engagement, rather than subscriptions, monetization, and print value? These are the types of questions that I would explore to determine how the relationship has evolved between the access journalists are receiving when compared to athletic departments who are increasingly distancing themselves from journalistic practices in favor of in-house content that nobody else has access to.

## **Conclusion**

A fascinating topic surrounding the issues related to sports journalists being denied the ability to accurately report on sporting issues due to the gatekeeping of information by athletic departments has been identified. A gap in the literature specifically covering the issue has also been identified. With the ever-changing landscape of college athletics, and the ever-changing landscape of how college athletics are covered in the media, identifying the role that media plays when approaching increasingly media-centric athletic departments is paramount to the survival of sports journalism and the watchdog role that sports journalism plays in collegiate athletics. It is my goal to have accurately studied and provided context for the unique situation as described within this report, provide recommendations towards the further study of the role sports journalism plays in this environment when faced with a new level of institutional gatekeeping, and further develop the literature related to the study of the phenomenon.



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## Appendix A

Verbatim responses from research subjects based on individual research questions asked:

***RQ1a: What are the most common scenarios or events where reporters experience denial of access?***

Participant A: “Perceived credibility. I've lived through the evolution of this where you quite literally had to be a newspaper beat writer or a television reporter from the market or maybe a national person and probably like hometown radio, even if it's not necessarily the, the rights holder, but I think there was an era where you couldn't get in unless you were the rights holder. And now with the evolution of media, it's become chaotic, and it's hard to judge who is really, I guess it's a harsh word, but worthy, you know, who's created a platform to get credentialed as opposed to those who have a platform, who would like to be credentialed to extend their coverage. I mean, you can now start up a podcast and really the secret goal of the podcast is just get into football games free, so it's, it's a much more hazy process now. And because of the result of that, I think a lot more people get in than have in the past.”

Participant B: “So actually one of the interesting ones right now, and this was in a very informal way, but, with all of like the, you know, EA sports college football stuff going on right now, you've seen some of the other places around the country say, okay, you know, whatever version of their state has for like a FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] request, they would do it and they would try and get, Clemson sent this to EA or LSU sent this and so we kind of talked about that where, you know, we work and the three of us were like well you know let's think about that but honestly if we just if we just texted you know **[redacted]** the SID at K-State like, hey, he'll probably just give it to us. And I think that's the only time that I've sent a text to **[redacted]** and

he's never responded. So he just basically ghosted me on that one. So that's one that it feels like if we're going to do it, it would need to be a little bit more formal. In terms of like overall, I would think that some of the other times that we have maybe experienced stuff like this, is in regards to, I mean, certainly anything that's remotely negative about personnel, whether that's a player or a coach. So you know, you don't get any correspondence on, I mean, when guys have been missing from the team or something, there's just a lot of that stuff that gets kept in house. And the only, the only, time you're going to get a response on it, is when they decide, 'Hey, we're releasing this statement and don't, don't talk about it again,' so, I mean, the Nae'Qwan Tomlin situation would fit that bill certainly, but that's those, those are the situations. Cause anything else and my experience, specifically with K-State and [redacted], they've both been very good about like if I need something or I'm looking for something, they're very helpful and responsive. And I guess in turn, the [redacted] SID that I dealt with is now at [redacted]. So I would throw them in that category too."

Participant C: "I think based on [redacted], I think that probably the most common denial of access comes when we attend road games. That's when it can be most difficult to kind of persuade or I get authorized by SIDs to talk to players after the fact, particularly for men's basketball. And this is something that we've kind of had a dialogue with the sports information directors about because for a lot of people going to road games is something they have to sell to their bosses in terms of the expense associated with it. And so there's a little bit of give and take between reporters and their bosses and reporters and athletic departments when it comes to getting access after games on the road, especially after losses on the road where players might be more reliant to talk. And usually you can count on at least one player being in the post-game press conference at the podium, but it's more in terms of extra players you might get off to the

side that can kind of be contentious or uncertain as to whether that access will be granted. I'm trying to think of any others. That's really the main scenario that stands in my mind. Generally, I think KU does a really good job balancing the needs of the reporters who cover it with the coaches and players that it is supposed to serve.”

***RQ1b: Are there any specific policies or guidelines set by athletic departments that outline the conditions under which access can be denied?***

Participant A: “To be honest, I no longer even bother reading them because I'm so established I can kind of get in almost anywhere. I couldn't apply to, since I cover college athletics, I couldn't just jump in and try to do NFL or anything, but anything I need access to, I'm granted. And part of that is, there's a layer here where if you're, if you're applying for visiting media, the visiting media sports information director, the gatekeeper of those credentials will check with the person that handles you on your home turf. So I'm always verified through that no matter what. That includes places like the [redacted] that still had archaic policies up to last time I went there that just didn't make sense limiting the number of people that could come in from the burgeoning fan website process, including established networks that are national. It was, it was very odd. They had very archaic rules, but because K-State always backed me up, I never had any issues.”

Participant B: “That's probably something where, if, you know, you wanted me to read the fine print, I probably should or could do that. And I know that those are outlined in some categories, but I think most of the time in my experience, it's just been one of those where it's, ‘Hey, I'm going to see if I can get this information from you and check with it,’ and if the response is, you know, ‘Can't do that,’ or whatever, then, you know, take that at face value and look elsewhere for that, as opposed to getting it directly from the athletic department.”

Participant C: “There may be such policies. I think they're outlined every now and then in terms of, in like broad emails, like for instance, at the start of fall camp for football, we'll get an email that, gives us a sense of what to expect, when we'll have access, when we won't, and usually I think there's, there's a pretty clear weighing out of expectations in advance of any given event, as to how things will go. I think the road games are kind of the exception in that respect. But, you know, when we have like immediate availability in advance of a home or road game for basketball, we know we'll get a player, we know we'll get Bill Self. I feel that generally it's pretty clear and you and very, very rarely does it happen that we get less than what we expect in terms of access. Usually, it'll be we get some bonus thing that we didn't anticipate, which is, I will never complain about. Now granted, it feels worse on an emotional standpoint when you have something taken away from you than when you have something extra given to you. But I think generally, I think generally we have pretty clearly outlined expectations about what kind of access we're going to get.”

***RQ2a: What reasons do athletic departments typically provide for denying access to reporters?***

Participant A: “Typically, they'll tell you they don't have enough room. They don't have enough capacity to handle everyone. I tend to find that to be a lie because I've heard people told ‘I couldn't get a credential to x school, so I'm not going.’ Why? Well, they don't have enough room, and I show up and there's 20 open seats. So I think they just, they've got some rules in their head sometimes and they kind of create them on the fly and then they use a more valid excuse to deny entry. I don't see as much of that anymore. But for those press boxes that haven't changed in 20 years, maybe even 10 years, the amount of content creators, you know, less journalists than creators, has blown up. with podcasts and everything. And so it's gotten much more crowded in those facilities.”



Participant B: “I would say most of the time the response that I would get in regards to denying access would be if it's something that is like a legal matter, certainly, that's a pretty easy workaround for these athletic departments. Really, I mean, any level of this stuff, people are just, you know, ‘It's, it's a legal matter, it's private, whatever,’ certainly like the school athletic departments, they have a little bit of an easier way too, because there's the academic side, so you can kind of lean on and be like, you know, ‘For, the protection and safety of our students, and we can't do it for that.’ And, I also think that there are also times where, depending on who you're trying to access, they're the ones that have the ultimate, you know, protection of these guys, like if they just tell you, ‘No,’ you're not hearing from them or you're not getting information on them, so I think that there's a lot of times where they can kind of play it off as, sometimes you can play it off dumb and be like, you know timing is just not gonna work out or whatever. But I think that there's a lot of ways and depending on the situation, they can either use a legitimate argument to keep that person or whatever information you're trying to get from you. But then at other times they can just hit you with the, ‘We said no because we said no.’ It's, it is almost like a very parental relationship. Like the athletic department is the parent and sometimes the reporters are the children, where, you can have all these questions, some valid or some really stupid, and they can tell you no because they said so. And that's kind of just how you have to deal with it at times.”

Participant C: “Most of them I feel are pretty, are pretty well justified. Sometimes it'll be that someone had a scheduling conflict, that's the most common one. The most common reason why we expect to have accident we don't get is a scheduling conflict. Like an athlete had class or had a lift or had treatment for an - that's a very common one, treatment for an injury. And as for the road games I mentioned earlier, sometimes it'll be that everyone is already on the bus or, has

already left or whatever. Trying to think of any other ones. Those are definitely the most common. I think the conflicts with classes and treatment come up pretty often in the, again, fairly rare circumstances that we are led to believe we're gonna get someone and then don't."

***RQ2b: How do reporters perceive the transparency and fairness of the access denial decisions made by athletic departments?***

Participant A: "Well, all those reporters of importance don't give a crap because they're in. It's one of the interesting things about the profession. The old school folks in more traditional media still feel as if their value exceeds all other values. When we know in the marketplace and in the real world, it doesn't any longer. Newspapers are of dwindling influence and television stations are not the only video content out there. So I just don't see much of a buddy system here where someone will go to bat for someone else. And honestly, I've never been asked to do that either."

Participant B: "Well, I think it probably depends on how often or how it's handled, because I would say anytime that I've, I've had that happen on the K-State side of things, most of the time I can understand it and I fully, you know, I can say, 'okay, whatever I'll move on.' There are other times where I'll be critical privately about that, but it's one of those where like, it's not like the athletic department did anything wrong for me to publicly call them out. And, you know, they're not trying to cover something up in most situations. I will say, like in the past, the one athletic department that I had a heck of a time with was when I was working in radio and in [redacted], and this is this is a long story, so you'll probably have to chop some of this up if you're not supposed to, you know, try and give away names and everything..." *Please note, the anecdote that is provided by the research participant has been removed because contextually, it provides too much identifying material. In summary, an athletic department said they would make a coach available for interview by local radio, and then failed to provide the coach for interview after*

*multiple attempts at establishing a professional connection with the athletic department in question. The transcript continues when anecdotal information completes.*

“...and so that's the only negative, like really one that I, I'm not afraid to drop that publicly and voice my displeasure, and how little I think of that sports information department there, because that's a very simple thing. And you're like, people are asking to try and get at the time, the coach of [redacted], on in a significant local market to you, like, you know, [redacted] is one of your bigger bases in terms of alums and a lot of other things, you would think that you would want to try and accommodate that, and they, for whatever reason, were not. And my problem isn't even necessarily that we never got [redacted]. Like, I could care less if I talked to the guy. But I would like to get him on because of who I know are listeners, and, at the very least, if we can't have him, we deserve the courtesy of a, ‘Hey, not going to be able to make this happen.’ And that's another one where you can, you can be the parent if you're the SID and you don't have to give me a reason for why we can't have him, but at least give me that email confirming, ‘Hey, can't do it, can't make it happen,’ as opposed to just not responding, because that to me is unprofessional. And like I said, the only time that I've not gotten a response in one of those situations is when it was an informal text message, more so as a, you know, we have a relationship that is extended beyond the, you know, you're the SID, I am the media personality. It's, we have this relationship where we can text back and forth. I would also say like an example of that too, would be numerous times when I was at, at [redacted]...” *Please note, the following anecdote that is provided by the research participant has been removed because contextually, it provides too much identifying material. In summary, the participant provides anecdotal experience of when athletic departments have been quick to respond and courteous when handling media requests. The transcript continues when anecdotal information completes. “...so*

like, they were accommodating, they at least gave us that courtesy of a response and that at the end of the day, that's all that I really care about. As long as there's the correspondence back and forth, I know that even if you're trying to keep something from me, you're at least treating me with a certain level of respect. And I just feel like I never got that from the [redacted] SID.”

Participant C: “I don't know, I think sometimes there's a little bit of skepticism. I think sometimes a little bit of skepticism, a little bit of frustration from time to time. I feel particularly when it comes to the idea that everyone is already on the bus after a road game or something when it's just concluded. Yeah, I would say again, because of the various stakeholders who are invested in reporters getting the most thorough possible coverage, it can be tough to not get an extra thing on the road that you were expecting. But sometimes there's acceptance, sometimes there's a little bit of frustration. I think it varies from time to time.”

***RQ3a: What alternative methods are sports journalists using to gather information when access to athletes/coaches/administrators is denied?***

Participant A: “We have used the trick of asking, particularly for a road game if we're denied, you know, we can only get one credential and we're traveling two, we've already booked two, we will ask, this is why it's important to keep relationships with your fellow media members in your market, we'll ask one of the TV stations that isn't going to credential us. And you know, we'll kind of sneak in under a different credential. Or we'll, if we're friends with some of the local media, like in Texas, we might ask one of them to add us to their list as an add-on. So there's ways to work around it. And I've even had K-State credential me directly, years ago, much to the frustration of the local SID when I showed up wearing that, but there was nothing much you could do. You really don't deny access to the visiting institution.”

Participant B: “I mean, in our part of the industry, it's a lot of relationships that are built with like parents, or maybe, you know, past coaches of a player, or somebody else that might have a connection there. Boosters of the athletic department are also ones, because most of the time those people are more along the sides of what you're looking for. Because they, you know, typically when you're looking for this kind of information, it's not positive, or at least it's, there's a lot of cloudiness with where it sits. So they want, they're like you, they want all the information they can get. And then they want that to be public because they have an agenda within that as well. And so I would say you're looking at former high school coaches, players, parents that are very much looking to share, and then the boosters. I would also throw in to some extent any other relations that you might have that you can kind of use in your background. So like very oddly enough, [redacted] has become like a pipeline to becoming a [redacted] on the K-State basketball team. And so going back now over like, probably the last six or seven years, at least one [redacted] has been a [redacted] on the K-State basketball team. And so, you know, I have a relationship. One of them [redacted], so I think it was when Shaun Neil Williams was leaving the team, I was just like, that was my way of being able to confirm that he was indeed doing this because we started to hear rumors of it just before our show started. Like I could confirm that because I knew a guy that would have that knowledge. He's inside the basketball facility every day. So that's another one where I have that. I know that like, other guys that I work with, they have some of the other staffers that aren't necessarily like official representatives of the university, like they have a good relationship with them so they can get information there. So there's just, there's a lot of ways to kind of work that around and it all comes back to how many people do you know and were you able to foster a solid enough relationship with them at any

point, so if you needed them in the future, they would feel comfortable sharing information that, you know, it shouldn't get out that it came from them.”

Participant C: “That's a really interesting question. And one thing that we find a little bit, there are certain events where athletes might not necessarily be under the purview of the athletic department. For example, at events that are overseen primarily by an NIL collective, they might be beyond the reach of the SIDs who usually govern. This is... a fairly rare occurrence, but I have heard people talk about this as an exceptional circumstance where they don't necessarily have to go through the typical channels. But in general, and this is generally, this is not just a KU thing, in general sports reporters have to be really cautious about any time they circumvent the usual channels because those people, I mean, very clearly delineate that you must only talk to athletes by going through them. And so, I do think there's a certain level of wanting to avoid like negative repercussions by going through. Because, you know, if you do one fleeting thing to get a story that others might not have, it can be rewarding in the short term, but you have to cultivate these relationships with SIDs and they don't like to see their authority ignored or, or transgressed or against or whatever another thing is it's easier to interviews like once as soon as an athlete graduates or is no longer necessarily under the the supervision of the SIDs for instance I've heard about people say like talking to athletes as they prepare for the draft process when they're no longer enrolled in the university or going through All-Star games or other postseason events that aren't necessarily part of their KU activities. Yeah, so this is something that I feel like everyone just has to toe the line with because it can pay off, but it can also risk drawing the ire of people who you have to interact with on a near daily basis to succeed at your job.”

***RQ3b: How has the use of social media and digital platforms influenced the way local sports journalists report and engage with their audience in this restrictive environment?***

Participant A: “Yeah, that's a great question actually. It... it has because you can create credibility in such non-traditional ways now. I mean, they might say, ‘Look, you're from a podcast. We're not, we don't typically, you know, allow podcasters in,’ and then they check your Twitter and you've got 20,000 followers or more. There's some weight to that that they can't ignore. And also, the moment you say, well, ‘University of Blah has denied me access and here's a guy who did it,’ that guy has a tough day or two with social media getting overrun. So there is kind of a bully pulpit now to being on social media that has aided some and also made it very understandably foggy in who is actually media and who's just someone that maybe people like their tweets.”

Participant B: “The social media aspect is kind of strange because I know one of the things that we wrestle with is and this comes to, I think, you know, I would include YouTube into how we use this, but we have to try and determine number one, when it comes to that, we want our video and podcast platforms to be successful and to pick up steam because that's, that's good in general. Like you can get financial gain from that from people that aren't directly involved with your products. So like, for example, for us, you may not be subscribed to our site, but if you're watching our YouTube religiously, like you're giving us views. That's going to help the money that we make from that. And then I would use like on the TV side, like you may not be in somebody's market, so you're not getting **[redacted]** on your TV, but you're probably, if you're a K-State or a KU fan or whoever, you're probably following **[redacted]** because he uses social media to pump out their stories and other information. And so, that's the way that I would think in terms of information. Now, when it comes like interacting with people on there, I think it's... I try to strike a balance with how I use it. Obviously, I want engagement. I want people to be able to see what I'm saying. And, like, I'm open to anybody that is going to respond or whatever. And

if I feel like there's something worth replying to them with, like I'll engage in that way, but I'm not like a, a mass, you know, responder to them. I'm not just like, 'everybody's got to get a response from me,' and you know, I'm like, 'whatever.' Normally, like, if it's somebody that is within the base of people that I know, I'm trying to kind of play to, I'm going to keep my, my negative tone down a little bit more. Like, you know, if somebody, if somebody is a fan of K-State, I'm not going to be as negative towards them because like that's who we need around and I'm not going to, you know, kind of rub them the wrong way. But if it's the NCAA tournament and it's a [redacted] fan, that, you know, is upset that I made a joke about their [redacted], not the specific player, he was just the vessel for it, but if that's what happens, then I'll probably be a little bit more snarky I would say with how I would interact with them, because then that's also good for my engagement with the base that I really do want which is the K-State side. Like, saying negative things about their rivals also gets you good engagement and, in turn, helps kind of pump things out to where okay, you know the way that some people, I mean you're I think you're a crazy person if you're not on the 'Following' tab on Twitter full-time, but if you're over there looking at like the 'For You' side or whatever, like that's gonna help shoot it up. Those people will see it. They'll click on your profile and then they'll see, 'this guy, he works at [redacted]. I'm gonna go check that out now.' So that I think is the big thing with social media, is, you're selling more so yourself and what you do as opposed to the product that you're creating because, not a ton of the clicks that we get in terms of stories on our site come from social media. But, what you do get is people that they see the name, they see where you work, and so then they'll go seek it out themselves to look around, not look for specific stories, so, I think that's one of the ways that it's just a it's a strange kind of way to have to operate. And I mean, video is always a good way to get people locked in. So like, like, I mean, the, the [redacted] video after



the [redacted] loss was, was impactful in terms of people seeing that, and seeing the [redacted] logo on it and everything, and we saw, a benefit from that. So there's just, there's a lot of ways that social media can play, but I, I don't know that there's a right or wrong way to do it. I think so much of it is just kind of catching lightning in a bottle with the right type of content for the right type of people. So sometimes you'll whiff on it and you won't get the views or the clicks that you want from something, but you kind of just got to, you're a volume shooter in the social media space. I think that's probably the best way if you're wanting to get anything out of it.”

Participant C: “In so many ways, I think there's a sense that everyone needs to be first on everything. Obviously, everyone says that all the time. And that can be dangerous because it can mean tweeting things before you have all the necessary context associated with them. It can mean tweeting things before you've had the chance to get a response from an athletic department. It can mean tweeting things when you only really have a half -formed idea of what you're tweeting about to begin with. And I think that athletic departments understand that this is an imperative that a lot of reporters feel. And so they'll sometimes say things like, please don't put this on social, like when they announce a press conference or something, because they don't want their decision to have a press conference to be interpreted as a statement of some kind, if that makes sense. So I think there's a... It's interesting to see how SIDs predict what effect reporters' actions might have on the public when it comes to social media and kind of try to preempt certain reactions by discouraging reporters from putting something out on social, usually for good reason. I feel like I'm talking kind of vaguely here, but I don't know.”

***RQ4a: What are the perceptions of sports journalists regarding the current quality and depth of their sports coverage compared to previous years?***

Participant A: “That's great because I've lived through this. There was absolutely no respect given to what is known as fan media. You know, what I call community journalism is just your community is all a school, not, you know, an actual town. That, that was difficult at first. You know, I came to this business in the [redacted], so I'm kind of on the front edge of it, and there were issues getting credentialed. And there were issues with being respected by your peers. Now, luckily I had, I carried more respect from over from the newspaper business into the industry. And everyone said I was crazy for doing what I did. And now we know that the people who really have a lot of weight and influence in the, in the local markets are sometimes people like me. And maybe, you know, sports radio is even more important in some ways. So, it really has changed and evolved and now, you know, I don't mean to be a jackass here, but most of the people who said, ‘you're ruining your career by getting out a newspaper and doing this,’ are all unemployed or they're no longer a newspaper. The world has evolved around them and I sometimes have a bad habit of when someone still pops off with that superiority about, you know, ‘well, you're not real media,’ I'll tend to call a newspaper people [redacted]. I mean, you're running out of business here, buddy. So, yeah, there's still some of it, but it was a much, much more profound, and I'm going to say something I hate saying, around the turn of the century that it, you know, it, as we moved into the 21st century, I think people started to, you know, slowly realize, ‘okay, this is legitimate,’ and it's just built incredible weight since then.”

Participant B: “I think right now we're seeing a pretty big... I don't know if it's a shift, but... I think it's both sides, so I think... for the media themselves, we're seeing them shift into being more like... unapologetically, ‘hey, I'm for this because I have this connection to it, I'm not going to be bashful about it anymore.’ And so in turn, I do think that... some people will take that and think that they can't be objective and they can't give you something at face value anymore. And

some people think that's a good thing. Like, in the space that I'm in right now, a majority of the people there probably appreciate the more friendly spin that it will get from some people. Others are a lot more like how I see it and like... I'm not shy about the fact that I went to K-State. I grew up a K-State fan. I want to see K-State be successful. That's important to me for numerous reasons. Number one, personally, because I like, you know, the school I went to being represented in a positive way. And number two, because it's good for me professionally right now. Like we get better traffic and everything's better for business if K-State is good. So, you know, if, if somebody is critical of like, man, you seem really, you know, like, [redacted] gets punched about it a lot by like [redacted] fans or something, and it's like, 'You seem really beat up about this,' or whatever, and it's like, well, yeah, because now he's grown this attachment to it. But that all started because like he's got financial gain to come from K-State being successful. And so that's where I think some of this stems from and how people view it is, you're, you know, whatever. I think, our space, it's easier to be like that because we're, you know, specifically focused on one, you know, spot and that's K-State. And we're doing it in a medium that is a little bit different than, you know, your traditional like newspaper or TV role where you're going to be seen by more than just the base that you're targeting with whatever you're doing a story on. And you, there's a little bit more of a professionalism that goes into it. So, and I also think on a national level, we know the situation that ESPN had before the, I guess it was the conference semi-finals with the Knicks-Pacer series, with the Stephen A. Smith stuff. And people were fired up that, okay, you had an hour pregame and basically it was spent on the Knicks and Stephen A. Smith being a Knicks fan. That cannot happen. You can make Stephen A. being a Knicks fan part of the bit and part of it, but, when you don't give equal time to the other side, or at least really any time, then that's a problem and people will perceive that as an issue. And I, like I'm

somebody that most of the time I write off the stuff that people get really fired up about and I'm like, eh, whatever, I don't care. And that one, even as somebody that like, didn't care to watch the Knicks and Pacers play, it does bother me that they have gone in that direction. Cause I don't think that's a great thing. So the way that I try to balance things is like, I've never been shy about giving my true opinion, even if I want to see K-State be successful. And I love K-State. Like I'm not, if I think something is going wrong or being done poorly, I'm going to call it out. I'm going to explain why I see it that way. I think there are a lot of other people that they just shy away from that. And I think that's the benefit to having kind of a bigger, a bigger roster of employees at, at some of these spots where you can have kind of the good cop, bad cop. And I think that I think that [redacted] is probably the good cop in a lot of ways where I work. And because he's going to skew more positive, he's going to stray away from more of the negative stuff, because then I can come in and be the bad cop. And so people will say, 'Hey, well, actually, there is at least one objective person here,' and so you can kind of get the best of both worlds. And you know, so and some people don't like that I'm like that, like, they think I'm too negative, which I probably am, you know, I'm a pretty glass half empty guy, but I think that's kind of how the world operates in a lot of ways, but I think that's one of those where, people on the outside, I think that they can see how the people have been more open about maybe not biases, but affiliations to certain places and they're not shying away from it as much anymore. And I think if people are on your side, it does not bother them. But if they have no connection to you or affiliation, it does still really bother them. And they're like, 'you're, you know, you're a shill for these people.' Like two examples that I would give on that..." *Please note, the following anecdote that is provided by the research participant has been removed because contextually, it provides too much identifying material. In summary, the participant provides anecdotal*

*experience of when reporters who are traditionally thought to be neutral do not display journalistic neutrality. The transcript continues when anecdotal information completes.*

“...and that just comes across to me as an outside observer to being a strange thing. And so, I always took it that his reporting was skewed in some way. And I do still think that the traditional newspaper route and these traditional mediums, you should not be skewing like that. Like, **[redacted]** should not skew way positive or way negative for K-State. He should just report it straight up. And I think he does a great job of that. People get mad at him when he posts that... Nae’Qwan Tomlin was arrested yesterday morning and it’s like, I don’t know, like that’s newsworthy. He has to do his job. So that’s why I think like those mediums should be like that. The TV side, you can be a little bit more cheerleader-y because that’s what people want when they’re watching TV most of the time, especially, you know, you get to the sports and the news, they want to hear good things about what’s going on there, but I know that they have the chops and they have the journalistic principles to, if something serious is going down, they’re going to give it the attention and the proper tone that it deserves.”

Participant C: “I think it depends on the age and experience of the journalist. I think that people who have been in the business a lot longer feel in many cases like they’ve been done wrong in recent years and that things have contracted significantly. And even me as someone who hasn’t been in the business very long, I can definitely see the effects of like the pandemic. In many ways, I think the pandemic led to a significant lessening of access that wasn’t... restored in a lot of ways when pandemic restrictions loosened. But yeah, I think there’s a perception, particularly for more experienced reporters, that things were different in the good old days. And I think they have some reason there in talking about... You said the depth of their reporting. I think that a lot of that does go to access. And I think access has been lessened a lot by... college athletic

departments. And I think to some extent, it's just because that's been the general tide of things. But also I think in another sense, athletes and athletic departments don't need reporters to get the message out there in the same way they once did. Just with the followings they can amass on social media and the ability to set their own message. So yeah, I think that there is a significant portion of the sports journalism industry that feels like they are due to environmental circumstances beyond their control for the most part not able to obtain the same depth that they might have in earlier years covering a given team.”

***RQ4b: How have audience engagement and feedback changed in response to the evolving dynamics between athletic departments and local sports journalists?***

Participant A: “You can't deny actual engagement. I mean, particularly on YouTube. I mean, now YouTube channels are popping up and when you go over there and see thousands upon thousands of people viewing videos, liking videos, going to lives, you can't deny that reality. And now they have to admit, well, we never really knew how many people were watching the TV station or listening to the radio. We never had that information. We just trusted that, you know, in our minds that that newspaper writer, since they're, you know, the newspaper had a hundred thousand subscriptions, there's a hundred thousand people a day reading this stuff. When in reality, it was probably much less than that. And even much less than the engagement we currently get on, you know, a more modern platform. So it's, it's hard to deny that someone's legitimate when their numbers say they carry some weight.”

Participant B: “I think one of the ways that it's kind of changed between... Well, I don't know if it's changed like this, but I think now that, you know, technology and it's easier to kind of disseminate information and you have like the video aspect and whatever else, and so now people on the outside, they see just how much access there is. Whereas if you're on like our side

of the aisle, you go, there's not enough access sometimes. And so one of the areas that I would say we used to get this complaint like every couple of weeks and it made me laugh especially last season somebody would ask a question about the basketball team and about some you know random guy, end the bench, that has not played, will not play. It's very clear that he's just probably not good at basketball and they would ask well, 'what's going on here? How's he been looking in practice?' and it's like I could not tell you how he's looked in practice. I have not heard a single coach or player say his name. So that's probably not a good thing. And then there are just, you will sometimes get response like, 'Well, shouldn't you be going to practice and watching?' And it's like, that's not how this works. And so you can explain to them numerous times, like I can't just shoot an email and say, 'Hey, two days from now, you cool if I come watch practice?' Like, no, that's not how this works. But I think fans and people that take in the media, they see the access and they think, 'oh, it's unlimited.' And in reality, they don't understand when it is kind of reined in and how much it works. And so I think you do kind of get negative responses from that sometimes because they think you should know everything. And certainly there are people that want to act like they know everything, but at the end of the day, they don't always know that. And that I will go back to, like, that's the beauty of being able to work at a place that has a longer roster of people that work there is, you know, the end of my time at **[redacted]** last year. There were only two of us working there. So like, if one of us didn't know there's a chance that the other one does but, you know, it's only two people. Now I work at a place with three sometimes four people where like, and I'll openly admit to people, I did it last year and I'll do it this year like hey, that's not my expertise. I could not tell you here, but I do know, like, this is what **[redacted]** said, or this is what **[redacted]** knows. Like, I can refer them to these people that are in the know, and there will be times where that will happen the other way,

where they'll say, 'Not really sure, I wasn't there, I didn't see it, but [redacted] was in this position, he saw this, this is what he says.' And so I think that's helpful, and I think that's one of those where that's how I interact with it. Like, you know, I'm okay telling people I don't know something. Like, that's... I think that's how you kind of build trust with them and educate them also in how this works to get them to be a little bit more understanding and have realistic expectations. Because it's not just the athletic departments that need to have transparency. It's our side that needs to have the transparency too. And I think if you get both sides like that, you have a better enlightened fan base or, you know, whatever you want to call the people that engage with that content.”

Participant C: “I don't know that audiences have much of an awareness or interest in these dynamics. I think to them, it's just like content and they don't necessarily think about the way in which that content was produced, how the sausage got made. I don't think audiences know, for instance, even who is at a road game covering it in person and who's covering a road game remotely. That's part of why the road game thing is an area of sensitivity because if you were able to get players off the side, off the side that would help differentiate you from those who are watching a press conference feed at their home in Lawrence or whatever. But I think that just readers and audiences don't know or give much thought to this. I mean, I remember my mom telling me that she never thought about what a dateline was or what it indicated until I started working in this industry. So I just feel like, yeah, some of the nuances in terms of the level of access are lost on the broader public and that's no fault of theirs. And actually in situations where one is denied access, it's sometimes reassuring to know that the audience as a whole might not necessarily notice and that it really might not have that much of an impact but it can still be frustrating on a personal level sometimes. But yeah, I do think that deeper and more and better



sourced writing gets a better response from audiences, obviously, but I think in terms of like the general day -to -day beat reporting, I don't think people really notice whether you have a one-on-one interview or something that comes out of a media availability even. Unless it gets into really personal and in-depth stuff. So, you've got to get that personal and in-depth stuff to make it count when you have a one-on-one opportunity. And those one-on-one opportunities can be rare. So, on the whole, I think that sometimes it can be hard to know just how valuable access really is because you don't know how much your audience will react to or care about it.”