

Twitter Usage by ESPN Fantasy Sport Columnists

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As a business, U.S. fantasy sports has grown into a \$2 billion annual enterprise with 32 million players as of June 2011.¹ Fantasy sports participants use such sources as microblogs, Internet, cell phones, television and print at much higher levels as a result of their participation. And how participants' fantasy teams and players performed altered perceptions of their favorite teams.² This reflects the Attitude-Behavior relation upon mere observance of fantasy sports. Fantasy sports has been defined as selecting players from sports to be on a team managed by a participant or fan in competition for points with other participants and fans.³ Fantasy sports has been identified as a top-10 area for sports-related media research.⁴ An executive vice president at ESPN listed fantasy players as the heaviest users of media across platforms, including the present study involving Twitter.⁵

User and Gratification Theory suggests that playing fantasy games reflects the diversion function of consuming media, as well as developing personal relationships with others and elevating personal identity. Three categories of participants have been identified: 1) Enthusiasts use gaming to expand their appreciation of the game; 2) socializers use gaming as a way to stay connected with friends; and 3) competitors use it for money or pride.⁶

Fantasy football participants, in particular, are more likely to attend at least one game per season and attend between .22 and .57 more games per season than non-players. That activity, according to The Fantasy Sports Trade Association, means the fantasy sports industry generates \$2 billion annually.⁷ A profile of today's typical U.S. fantasy player reveals this: male, 33, has played for more than eight years, spends three

hours weekly and \$467 yearly consuming fantasy content.⁸ Average household income was \$94,000 in 2008.⁹

The industry's use of new media technologies, such as the microblog Twitter, is having a positive effect on participation. The fantasy sports industry's ability to provide immediate and insightful analysis is helping to build efficient customer relationship management. Among the factors helping to build that loyalty are the sophistication of the product, demographic maturity of users, participation by users, and Internet and mobile use.¹⁰

As a journalistic endeavor, though, growing pains continue as the industry matures and slowly adopts journalistic ethical norms. Fantasy sports journalists have shown in the past decade a greater adherence to journalism norms and ethics, including a slow increase in attribution and increasing focus on the cognitive function of information over the diversion function of entertainment.¹¹ The adoption of journalism norms is mixed, however, and in addition, the institutional role of fantasy sports journalism has aligned with the culture of Market Orientation. The logic of the market seems to trump fantasy news designed primarily in the public interest, as the following study will show.

One distinctive element of fantasy reporting is its emphasis on Subjectivism over Objectivism because the subjectivist epistemology includes the interpretive nature of the field; reporters are making educated judgments. Analytical journalism doesn't require its practitioners in fantasy to be neutral. In fact, the author finds that writers are engaged and playing the fantasy sports they cover, another distinctive element and, in most cases, a requirement.

Fantasy sports journalism is developing a distinct culture of measurement, one that is moving toward empirical measurement and away from low analysis. It has been a slow process from merely clever writing to empirical observation and analysis. The 2011 winners of the Fantasy Sports Writers of America baseball awards, for example, had sophisticated statistical analysis as a distinguishing characteristic. I have been one of two national FSWA judges for the past four years and have personally noted the evolution. Although that suggests an etic approach, this paper adopts the emic approach.

Another noteworthy element of fantasy sports journalism is its participatory culture. Fantasy journalists themselves play the game they report on, which is different from traditional sports journalists. As such, fantasy sports users often want constant “telepresence,” defined with regard to Twitter as keeping in touch without actually and literally being in touch.¹² And with Twitter, the microblog platform studied in this paper, followers like to be “in touch” during football season, in particular. Much of the increase in Twitter followers is seasonal, with fall being the peak because of football. A sports journalist from Sports Illustrated, Scott Novak, notes, “We are seeing a lot of engagement with our sports fans across all our social media platforms,” topped by Twitter.¹³

Reporters are expected to use social media in their coverage, including Twitter. Tweets are now “as big a part of her job as filing stories for the paper, just as they were for her NFL sports writing colleagues,” writes sports reporter Lindsay Jones.¹⁴ Content that drives engagement, then, is at a premium. With that as a guide, the use of Twitter by fantasy sports writers is the author’s focus in this paper. Based on the previous review of literature, the following research questions direct the present study:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ 1: How do full-time ESPN fantasy sports columnists use Twitter to cover the National Football League?

RQ 2: How do full-time ESPN fantasy sports columnists in their use of Twitter compare to the larger norms of fantasy sports journalism?

METHOD

The analysts reviewed in this study are all employed by ESPN, and each is listed as a “fantasy football analyst” by ESPN. Listed in random order -- irrelevant to the study, they are: Ken Daube, Eric Karabell, Christopher Harris, Tristan H. Cockcroft, Stephania Bell, KC Joyner, Matthew Berry and AJ Mass. The eight analysts totaled 1,914 tweets from Oct. 1, 2011, to Oct. 31, 2011. Each of the 1,914 tweets was placed into a single category. The categories relate either to fantasy football or to Twitter. The categories are: Injury Updates, Active or Inactive updates, Promotions, Retweets, Mentions, Answering Questions, and General Tweets.

The category of an “Injury tweet” is, as defined by our research, a tweet regarding the injury of a player during an NFL game or a tweet regarding the status of a particular player’s injury. “Active or Inactive update” is defined as a tweet about a particular player’s status for his football game. This included any tweet where a player was named, along with whether he was officially listed as inactive (also known as “out”), questionable, probable or active, categories the NFL uses. The third category listed is “Promotions.” A tweet categorized in Promotions discusses any upcoming media event in

which the ESPN analyst tweeting was taking part in or endorsing for colleagues, providing their followers with a hyperlink or URL to a media event listed above or to a self-promoting link (for example, a product being sold by the analyst), or requesting a Retweet from another Twitter user to promote themselves. The final category relating to fantasy football is “Answering Questions.” In other words, tweets placed into this category were tweets by an ESPN analyst that answer a question posted by one of their Twitter followers. Questions ranged from asking the analysts about advice for fantasy football rosters, trades proposed to them by league opponents, and asking the analyst which player to start over another on their roster for a particular week.

The following three categories deal less with fantasy football and relate more to Twitter as a social medium: The first category is “Retweets.” A retweet is when a Twitter user clicks the “Retweet” button, which automatically copies and distributes a tweet to the particular user’s followers. This can be done manually, too, by mentioning the user you wish to retweet followed by “RT” (i.e. @AJMass RT: *tweet tweet tweet...*). Tweets categorized as a retweet followed the above format. The second category is “Mentions.” When ESPN analysts mentioned someone in a tweet, they tagged a particular follower in a post. These tweets did not answer questions but were tweets falling under general conversation unrelated to fantasy football. The final category is a “General Tweet.” A general tweet is any tweet by an analyst that does not fall into one of the previous six categories in the study.

RESULTS

The study produced 64 different calculations of data, as well as a converted percentage for each category. The study also produced seven different calculations that summed the eight analysts and was also converted into an overall percentile (all percentages were rounded to the nearest whole percent).

AJ Mass tweeted the most of any analyst. Of the 1,914 tweets by ESPN fantasy analysts, Mass accounted for 817 tweets, or 43% of all tweets. Of these tweets, Mass used Twitter to answer questions from followers 74% of the time, or 606 of 817 tweets. His next highest category of tweets was Mentions, only totaling 9% of his tweets. Promotional tweets were third most, totaling 9% of his tweets, followed by General Tweets at 4%, then Retweets (2%), Active/Inactive Status Updates (0.6%), and Injuries (0.4%). When comparing all categories, AJ Mass used his Twitter almost exclusively to interact with followers, answering roster and trade questions from followers about their specific Fantasy Football leagues and teams. Clearly, he values the community interaction that Twitter fosters.

Following Mass with the second most tweets was Stephania Bell, totaling 390 tweets, or 20% of all tweets recorded. Half of Bell's tweets were Retweets, typically consisting of retweeting NFL organizations and athletic trainers, informing and updating followers of player injury updates. Because the tweets were retweeted and not original content by Bell, the retweets about injuries were not categorized as an Injury Update. Bell's next highest category of tweets was Answering Questions, consisting of 72 tweets, or 18% of her 390. Third highest were Injury Updates (10%), followed by

Active/Inactive Updates (8%), Promotions (7%), General Tweets (6%) and Mentions (1%). Bell, a certified physical therapist, used her Twitter page to inform followers of players' injuries and the severity of injuries.

Matthew Berry tweeted third most of all analysts, 299 times, or 16% of all analyst's tweets. Unlike Mass and Bell, Berry, who in 2008 received fantasy sports journalism's first Emmy Award, used Twitter to mention followers more than any other category. Berry's tweets were categorized as a Mention 31% of the time, or 92 of his 299 tweets. His next highest category of tweets was Retweets, totaling 22% of his tweets. Third most were General Tweets, totaling 18%, followed by Answering Questions (12%), Promotional (8%), Active/Inactive Updates (6%) and Injury Updates (3%).

Following Berry was analyst KC Joyner, contributing 144 of the 1,914 tweets, or 8% of all tweets. Of Joyner's 144 tweets, zero tweets fell into the categories of Injury Updates (0%) or Active/Inactive Updates (0%). The majority of Joyner's tweets were categorized as Answering Questions (28%). His next highest percentages were categorized as Mentions (25%) and General Tweets (23%), followed by promotional tweets (16%), and Retweets (8%). Much of Joyner's reporting about fantasy sports journalism is under ESPN Insider, a pay wall, although his Twitter account is accessible by all.

Christopher Harris tweeted fifth most of all analysts studied, contributing 5% of 1,914 tweets (102 tweets). Of his 102 tweets, 28% consisted of Answering Questions from followers, Harris' highest percentage of any category. Promotional tweets followed closely at 27% of all tweets. Harris held the highest percentage of promotional tweets of all analysts, promoting both ESPN affiliations and the release of his new book, Slotback

Rhapsody. The promotions for his book constituted the majority of Harris' promotional tweets. Harris' third-highest tweeting category was General Tweets (20%), followed by Injury Updates (11%), Active/Inactive Updates (7%), Mentions (4%) and Retweets (3%).

Tristan H. Cockcroft follows Christopher Harris. Cockcroft contributed 66 (3%) of the 1,914 tweets. Like Joyner, Cockcroft did not tweet any Injury Updates through the month of October (0%). Cockcroft's largest tweet category was General Tweets, consuming 29% of his total tweets. Second to General Tweets was Promotional tweets at 26%. Following Promotional tweets were Answering Questions (18%), Mentions (15%), Retweets (8%), and Active/Inactive Status Updates (5%).

Ken Daube also contributed 3% of the total tweets by all analysts. Daube's tweets consisted mainly of General Tweets, making up 60%. Daube's second largest category was Mentions (18%), followed by Answering Questions (10%), Retweets (6%) and Promotional tweets (6%). Daube did not write any tweets that would be categorized as an Injury Update, or an Active/Inactive Status Update (both 0%).

Finally, Eric Karabell contributed 2%, the lowest, of all tweets by the eight ESPN analysts. Karabell often is featured in ESPN Insider although his Twitter account is public. Along with Daube and Joyner, 0% of Karabell's tweets fell into either Injury Updates or Active/Inactive Status Updates. Karabell's largest percentage of tweets fell into the category of Answering Questions, consisting of 35%. His second largest category was Retweets (22%). Mentions followed Retweets (17%), with Promotional tweets at 15% and concluding with General Tweets, at 11%.

The following results are the percentages for the eight analysts combined, ordering the categories from largest to smallest percentages of tweets. Of the 1,914

tweets, 816 (43%) were categorized as Answering Questions. The second largest category was Retweets (16%), with Mentions third largest, consisting of 12% of all tweets. Following Mentions was General Tweets and Promotional tweets (both at 11%). Injury Updates and Active/Inactive Status Updates rounded out the final two categories, both consisting of 3% of all tweets.

| Fantasy Football Columnist | Total Posts | Injury Updates | Active/Inactive Status Updates | Promotions | Answering questions | Retweets | Mentions | General Tweets |
|----------------------------|-------------|----------------|--------------------------------|------------|---------------------|-----------|-----------|----------------|
| Ken Daube | 50 (3%) | 0 | 0 | 3 (6%) | 5 (10%) | 3 (6%) | 9 (18%) | 30 (60%) |
| Eric Karabell | 46 (2%) | 0 | 0 | 7 (15%) | 16 (35%) | 10 (22%) | 8 (17%) | 5 (11%) |
| Christopher Harris | 102 (5%) | 11 (11%) | 7 (7%) | 28 (27%) | 29 (28%) | 3 (3%) | 4 (4%) | 20 (20%) |
| Tristan H. Cockcroft | 66 (3%) | 0 | 3 (5%) | 17 (26%) | 12 (18%) | 5 (8%) | 10 (15%) | 19 (29%) |
| Stephania Bell | 390 (20%) | 38 (10%) | 33 (8%) | 26 (7%) | 72 (18%) | 194 (50%) | 4 (1%) | 23 (6%) |
| KC Joyner | 144 (8%) | 0 | 0 | 23 (16%) | 41 (28%) | 11 (8%) | 36 (25%) | 33 (23%) |
| Matthew Berry | 299 (16%) | 9 (3%) | 18 (6%) | 23 (8%) | 35 (12%) | 67 (22%) | 92 (31%) | 55 (18%) |
| AJ Mass | 817 (43%) | 3 (0.4%) | 5 (0.6%) | 77 (9%) | 606 (74%) | 18 (2%) | 76 (9%) | 32 (4%) |
| Total | 1914 | 61 (3%) | 66 (3%) | 204 (11%) | 816 (43%) | 311 (16%) | 239 (12%) | 217 (11%) |

DISCUSSION

The above data provide two different conclusions. They are: 1) ESPN Fantasy Football analysts use Twitter at a higher rate than their ESPN colleagues who are not considered a “fantasy sport” analyst; and 2) ESPN Fantasy Football analysts use Twitter as an informal medium to communicate with their followers at will.

People who play fantasy sports are often different from traditional sport fans. Fantasy sport players are more often engaged in following their favorite sports teams, analysts and related information. Although sports journalism is a niche market itself, fantasy sport journalism is an even smaller (but growing) niche. Membership in Fantasy Sports Writers of America, a fantasy journalism, doubled from 2008 to 2010 but still remains in the hundreds.¹⁵ To appeal to this niche market, fantasy sport analysts, in particular fantasy football analysts, have found a new medium to engage with their fans: Twitter.

Twitter incorporates three distinct elements, which separate it from traditional, mainstream channels and other new-media options. They are: 1) message compression; 2) speed; and 3) the potential to reach a niche audience.¹⁶ Fantasy sports consumers represent all three elements. A tweet is limited to 140 characters, and any letter, number, punctuation mark, symbol or space written is one character. This forces each tweet from a fantasy sports analyst to be short and concise. The speed of Twitter allows analysts to reach their audience instantly. Seconds after a tweet is published, fantasy football players worldwide can read, interpret, and react or retweet.

In a game like fantasy football, immediacy is crucial. Participants continually check which NFL football players are starting, active or inactive, so they can set their

rosters to create the best outcome for their team. It is this sense of immediacy that separates fantasy football analysts from other traditional football and sport analysts. Before an article gets published on ESPN, each submission is read and edited by a series of editors. Other ESPN football analysts and reporters, such as Sal Paolantonio, John Clayton and Adam Schefter, must fact-check and confirm with sources before publishing certain information, which differs from fantasy football analysts, who have no immediate editor as filter.

Fantasy football analysts can publish rumors on Twitter about player updates from sources that might not yet be confirmed. Information about one specific player might not be considered newsworthy enough to publish an entire article on ESPN; however, to a niche market like fantasy football players, this information is important, and this is where use of Twitter holds an advantage. ESPN Fantasy Football analysts use Twitter at a higher rate than their ESPN colleagues who are not considered a “fantasy sport” analyst. This is because fantasy sport news requires a higher sense of immediacy to its audience before being published, unlike a traditional sports story.

The expectation of tweeting more is a difference in content between traditional sports reporters and fantasy football reporters. ESPN fantasy football analysts also tweet more than their colleagues because of this difference in content that each covers. Traditional consumers of sports news often read articles that impact sports on a national level, including, for example, legal issues regarding a player or coach, league standings or feature articles. Traditional sports news consumers do not necessarily search for a specific type of sport news, unlike fantasy sport consumers who are searching for a specific type of information regarding NFL players and teams.

With the immediacy and outreach of Twitter, it is no surprise it has quickly become one of the world's largest social networking sites. Sports journalists use Twitter, as well as athletes, who often bypass sports reporters and post their own updates on Twitter, creating a major challenge for anyone working in the field of sports journalism. One implication of athletes bypassing sport journalists is that it can create a loss of credibility among sport journalists. Suzanne L. Cooke, who studied this change, said this has created major challenges for traditional sports journalists: "Increased accessibility does not always lead to increased accountability. In fact, this enlarged market has led to decreased reliability as journalists feel augmented pressure to provide breaking news and headlines to gain public attention and revenue. Consequently, journalists are increasingly sensationalizing and dramatizing the personal lives of athletes in an effort to stay competitive."¹⁷

Bypassing traditional reporters gives another advantage to fantasy sport analysts, who typically do not need to be in close contact with such sources as athletes, trainers and coaches. When an athlete or professional sport organization tweets any news, it can be seen instantly by fans, reporters and analysts. While traditional sports journalists must first fact-check tweets before publishing, fantasy sports journalists are not held to the same standard. The practice of not fact-checking disregards traditional journalistic standards; however, a tweet by a fantasy sport analyst can be quickly corrected just as easily as it was tweeted, unlike publishing an entire article like a traditional sports journalist. Because of the immediacy for dissemination that Twitter offers, a study on the accuracy of posts by fantasy sports writers would be an area ripe for research. Therefore, one explanation of why ESPN Fantasy Football analysts use Twitter at a higher rate than

their ESPN colleagues who are not considered a fantasy sports analyst would be because of the immediacy of Twitter, and the accessibility it offers to both athletes and sport consumers.

ESPN Fantasy Football analysts also use Twitter as an informal medium to communicate with their followers at will. As observed in the study, 816 of 1,914 tweets by eight ESPN Fantasy Football analysts were tweets responding to questions by their followers (43% of all tweets recorded). The participatory culture of Twitter is lauded, but some see negative journalistic characteristics. Twitter does not easily allow for follow-up questions in traditional sports reporting and can be the forum to spread rumors quickly before a news organization can get the facts needed to knock down a false tweet.¹⁸

However, this might apply less to fantasy sport analysts and their tweets. Although Twitter does pose the possibility of spreading false news, if the news comes from athletes or their respective sports organization, the authenticity of the source can be assumed to be true if not the message. Also, because of the timeliness Twitter allows, a false tweet can quickly be corrected, either by deleting the tweet or tweeting again to correct the false news. As documented in this study, 43% of tweets by ESPN Fantasy Football analysts fell under the category of “Answering Questions.” These questions posed by the eight analysts’ followers included roster advice, trade advice and injury questions. With almost half of all tweets answering questions from followers, ESPN Fantasy Sport analysts demonstrate that Twitter can be conversational and allow follow-up questions, with some analysts responding to the same follower multiple times within a short period of time.

The dialogue between ESPN Fantasy Football analysts and their followers was also very informal. ESPN Fantasy Football analysts do not always adhere to some traditional journalistic practices, such as proofreading or writing in Associated Press Style. This is evident in a tweet by ESPN Fantasy Football analyst Matthew Berry in his tweet on Feb. 28, 2012. Berry's tweet was about Houston Astros pitcher Brett Myers being moved out of the starting rotation of baseball pitchers and being placed in the bullpen of the Houston Astros. The tweet read, "Just finished podcase and leaned Astros moving Brett Myers to bullpen. He is the leading candidate to be closer..." The tweet lacks a sense of traditional journalism, with the first sentence missing a few words compared to a traditional sports lead. Also, the first sentence should have read, "Just finished podcast and learned Astros moving Brett Myers to bullpen." The word *learned* was misspelled in Berry's tweet and was never corrected. Berry clearly wanted the news to be spread immediately regardless of spelling. Similarly, ESPN Fantasy Football analyst Stephania Bell can be seen responding to a follower's tweet on Feb. 27, 2012, where she abbreviates "spring training" to "spring trg." The tweet read: "Yes, sir. Headed out after the #NFLCombine. Next up: spring trg RT @_AndrewWright_ : @Stephania_ESPN That you I saw in the Indy airport just now?" Both Bell and her follower, Andrew Wright, engaged in a short, informal dialogue.

CONCLUSION

Fantasy sports journalism has undergone a shift in thinking in the last decade. In 2008, writers saw their craft more as a diversion function than a cognitive one. Thinking shifted just two years later in a study replicated with the Fantasy Sports Writers of America when a total of 59 percent disagreed with the statement: “Entertaining readers is more important than informing them.” The shift from 2008 to 2010 represents possibly the most significant change and represents a seriousness of purpose and increasing professionalism. One writer put the change in perspective: “Readers are players, and they want information that they can use. Entertaining them is a cherry on the information pie.” For the first time in fantasy sports journalism, most writers viewed their purpose as feeding the cognitive function first, then the diversion of entertainment.¹⁹

But the results of the use of Twitter by ESPN fantasy journalists contradict that shift. The microblog was used more for diversion than cognition, more for promotion than information. The least frequent mention was active/inactive or injury updates while cross promotion was much more prevalent. User and Gratification Theory is reinforced in this study.

Some differences remain between fantasy and traditional sports journalists. First, engagement with audiences is higher in the participatory environment of fantasy sports journalism, which Twitter and other social media are designed to emphasize.

Telepresence is emphasized as a way for fantasy journalists to engage and communicate with their audience, particularly answering their questions. Use of Twitter also acknowledges a shift away from television-centric coverage, which is still the primary

domain of traditional sports journalists, rather than social media, which new forms of journalism, including fantasy reporting, emphasize. Second, because Twitter is a microblog with just 140 characters per tweet, the writing is more conversational and less formal, including the tone, grammar, style and use of punctuation. And third, cross promotion by fantasy journalists themselves is higher than in traditional reporting, in which promotion occurs less by reporters and more by anchors and producers.

Today, ESPN could not offer comprehensive sports coverage without fantasy sports. Many sports audiences care more about fantasy than the event result itself. That the larger fantasy realm is now adopting norms and ethics of traditional journalism gives it greater credibility within the field. The Market Orientation theory, however, limits some of the potential, and it is observed in how Twitter is used in this study. The object of this paper is to document increasing professionalism in fantasy sports journalism, but the field's emphasis on Market Orientation emphasizes a rating and promotion mentality perfect for statistics in commercial media and User Gratification among audiences but possibly less so for the cognitive function. Market Orientation theory sometimes prioritizes what audiences want to know over need to know. It can emphasize entertainment, but for serious fantasy players, useful information is what they seek.

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