Profiling the Sports Blogosphere

Charlotte Allen **&** Jason Reese**,** Stephen F. Austin State University

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to provide primary research regarding how sports blogs utilize the social media and generate revenue for their blog. This study begins with a literature review of the blogging world with a special emphasis on the sports sector of the blogosphere. The literature review is followed by a discussion of the research method of content analysis, which was employed to examine the selected sports blogs. Furthermore, recommendations are made concerning sampling methods and how future statistical sampling of the sports blogosphere could proceed to improve the representativeness of samples and data collection in this research topic.

Profiling the Sports Blogosphere

A great deal of research has been conducted by marketing researchers, business, and computer trade publications concerning the reasons why someone would decide to start and maintain a blog. Blogs are essentially online publications, designed to be read by someone, whether it is a large global audience or only an audience of a few people who are interested in the blogger's topic (Editors & Blood , 2002). Studies by Technorati and AOL's Digital Marketing Services shed light on some of the main reasons why people write blogs: to establish themselves as authorities or experts in a field, to create a public record of one's thoughts and opinions, to keep in touch with other people online, especially friends and family, and to use writing as a tool for therapy or self-help (Ingram, 2007).

Blogging has also had a major impact in the media and news business as well. Many bloggers see it as part of their jobs to "fact-check" mainstream media (MSM) and to push certain news stories that the bloggers feel that the MSM has either ignored or not given enough attention to (Hewitt, 2005). Blogging is "confronting journalism, with the rise of current-events blogs that deconstruct news coverage, spew opinion and even scoop the big media from time to time" (Palser, 2002, p. 58). Blogs are also allowing ordinary people's voices to have an impact in a way that was only possible in the past for those who had access to large media outlets, such as newspapers or televised news shows (Hewitt, 2005; Pierro, 2007). Currently, businesses are using blogs to communicate with consumers and as a marketing tactic. Some of the possible benefits to a business blogging are that blogging can help to increase profit, increase website traffic and improve search engine rankings, recruit new employees, and communicate with coworkers (Ellsworth, 2007).

The Online Blogging World

In June 2003, over four million Americans went online and accessed blogs to find out breaking news and information about the war in Iraq (Rainie, Fox and Fallows, 2003). In November 2004, Pew Internet studies reported that 8 million Americans (or 7% of the 120 million US adults who use the Internet) said that they had created a blog; however, at that time 62% of US adult Internet population did not know what a blog was (Rainie, 2005). By February 2005, over 32 million Internet users were also blog readers (Rainie, 2005) with the blogging world almost doubling in size about every 6 months (Sifry, 2006). So, what is a blog and where did it come from? In 1998, Jesse James Garrett, the editor of Infosift website, began to compile a list of

other Internet sites that were similar to his own site. He then sent that list to another website owner who sent it to another website owner and so forth, forming a communication network (Blood, 2003). As of early 2006, there were at least 27 million active blogs online, with more blogs in inactive status (Sifry, 2006). Technorati's State of the Blogosphere Report showed there to be approximately 72 million blogs in 2007. While the growth rate of blogging in the US is slowing, the growth of blogs outside the US is rising at a much faster rate than in the US. Since most of the main business trade publications are blogging (e.g., Wall Street Journal, Business Week, Advertising Age, to name a few.), it is ironic that there is such a lack of research in the academic world of business disciplines.

While there have been a number of news articles and online discussions concerning blogs (especially among bloggers, the people who run the blogs), there has been little academic research on this topic, with most of the research being done in the management information systems, communication, and political science areas, rather than in the marketing arena (Lee & Lee, 2006; Wagner, 2006). One of the few marketing studies is Holzwarth, Janiszewski, and Neumann (2006) who discussed avatars (graphic representations of users or other people online) and their impact on shopping and browsing habits on websites, including blogs. Singh and Singh (2008) also analyzed how entrepreneurs could use blogs as part of their marketing effort while Pan, McLaurin and Crotts (2007) covered how blogs were being used as marketing tools in the travel industry. In the last few years, there have been multiple academic papers published concerning blogs and politics. Current major academic studies include Wallsten's (2007) analysis of the relationship between the blogging world and mainstream media and Hayes, Singer and Ceppos' (2007) study on the impact of blogging and the credibility of journalists. From a public relations perspective, Trammell (2006) outlined the integration of blogs into presidential candidate websites, Davis (2009) discussed how political journalists use blogs to inform their readers, and Schoroeder (2006) discussed the dilemma of whether an employee should or should not blog about work. Herring and Paolillo (2006) also examined content on blogs in terms of gender stylized writings of the blog authors.

There does exist a rising trend of academic research dealing with consumer behavior and blogging: Huang (2015) provided research into consumer perceptions of product review blogs; Lu, Chang and Chang (2014) researched the impact of blog recommendations on purchase intentions; and Dooley, Jones and Iverson (2014) discussed targeting the medical community via blogging. These studies focus mainly on the consumer behavior and psychology impact of blogging, specifically honing in on why a person reads a blog or the impact of a blog on attitude or behavior. Herring and Paolillo (2006) examined the actual content of the blogs they researched, but focused on specific psychological measurements that could be calculated from that content. Very few of these studies were interested in the details of how the social media were used on a blogging platform and none of them focused on revenue models of the blogs they researched; thus this paper heads into theoretical and practical avenues not addressed in general blogging literature.

The Sports Blogosphere

While there has not been a tremendous amount of research conducted in the business disciplines on blogging, the same cannot be said of the sports arena, although some of the research falls into the medical area (ex. how blogging and news reporting has impacted the awareness of concussions received by athletes). Much of the research has concentrated on specific sports incidents and case research. Norman et al. (2015) outlined the issues and controversy around the proposed move of the New York Islanders of the National Hockey

League while Merrill, Bryant, Dolan and Chang (2015) provided a case study on the alleged harassment by the New York Jets Football team along with the role of sports blogs and the media in the situation. McCarthy (2013) wrote a very interesting piece analyzing the creation and relationships between sports blogs run by "fans" versus those run by professional media companies. Many of the research studies tend to be conducted from either a psychological or sociological perspective (e.g. Clavio and Eagleman's 2011 study of gender bias based upon the presence of sexually suggestive photographs in sports blogs or Antunovic and Harden's 2013 descriptive study of women bloggers in the sports industry).

There also exists a great deal of content specializing in the growing popularity of Twitter (and other microblogging platforms) in the sports field. Brown and Billings (2013) detailed a case study of the use of Twitter by sports fans in reaction to the University of Miami NCAA investigation from a public relations viewpoint of handling a media crisis. Football (Soccer) clubs research into how their fans react and use Twitter and how the clubs could use that information for media purposes to build relationships with their fans was outlined by Price and Hall (2013). Certainly many pro athletes have jumped on the Twitter bandwagon in the last few years prompting most professional leagues to issue guidelines on the use of social media by athletes (Ortiz, 2011). The rise in popularity of SB Nation (Sports Blog Nation) online network, averaging nearly 50 million unique visitors per month, points to the fact that not only is the sports blogosphere here, but it is here to stay (Orlando, 2013) and is deserving of our time and effort to research.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study is to provide primary research regarding how sports blogs utilize social media and generate revenue. The study utilizes content analysis to address and answer this research objective. The next section of the paper will discuss the data collection method used for the research and provide the results of the study, along with the limitations and applications of this research. While content analysis is a standard data collection tool used in advertising, it is only recently that this technique has been applied to websites (Macias and Lewis, 2003-4). Content analysis was also used by Bichard (2006) to investigate communication framing dimensions of time, space, tone, and topic on the official blogs of presidential political candidates in 2004 election. Macias and Lewis (2003-4) studied what information was presented on prescription drug websites. This research will extend the use of content analysis further into the world of the Internet, specifically targeting sports blogs.

Content analysis (sometimes called textual analysis in the social sciences) is a standard methodology for studying communication, especially in print and visual media. Holsti (1969, p. vii) offers a broad definition of content analysis as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages." Content analysis has been used to study advertisements, interviews, brochures, and websites, to name a few. Topics that can be addressed can vary from an analysis by gender and race of spokespersons in print and television advertisements during a set time period to whether prices are given in numeric or general terms in newspapers ads. Content analysis is a very flexible form of data collection, which is why is has expanded to the Internet and why it was used as the data collection method for this study.

The Content Analysis Procedure

First, a sample of the top 250 blogs was generated based on Internet traffic statistics. Then, a screen capture of each blog was saved for coding purposes. The screen capture contained the blog's complete postings along with advertisements and any other data for a 24-hour period. A printed copy of the screen capture was made as well for back-up purposes. While most blogs contain archives of previous posts, these archives cannot be used for this data collection, since they usually contain only the postings for the day and not the advertisements nor the links, which are some of the important data variables utilized in this study. Then, each blog was analyzed for content. Out of the 250 blogs sampled for the data collection, twenty-four of them predominantly featured sports content. It is this extracted sample of twenty-four sports blogs that were used for data analysis.

A coding guide was created to analyze the data on each of the blogs. A coding guide is similar to a survey used in research except that the researcher will fill in the coding guide with information pulled from the blog instead of information given to the researcher over the phone or in person. The coding guide contained places to record the following information: major blogging topic, revenue information (donations asked for, form of donation, onsite store, allow advertisements, how many advertisements, sponsorship by a media group, and membership in a blogging network), use of social media (post sharing, use of various social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and twitter, posting of video or audio, photo sharing, RSS feeds, and games), and audit information (name of blog and web address, blog ranking, date blog sampled, and coder).

Given that the focus of this study is social media use of and revenue models of sports blogs, the data collected from the content analysis needed to address those topics and be very detailed given the emergent nature of the procedure. At the start of data coding, the content analysis raters only noted whether or not the blog allowed advertising. After analyzing a number of blogs, it was decided to alter the content analysis form to note the number of advertisements as well given that researchers noted at that point that there could be a wide variation in the number of advertisements allowed, thus a variation in the amount of revenue generated from the advertisements for each blog.   Revenue models were of specific interest to this study since they have basically been ignored in general blogging and sports blogging research. Someone or something must pay for the bandwidth and possibly give some financial consideration to the person (or persons) creating content for the blog, The amount and breadth of social media use needed to be documented as well through the content analysis procedure. This data could provide information on the social media tools that were used (or not used) by bloggers. Researchers were also interested in whether or not more social media use could have any impact into the amount of traffic for each blog.

Revenue Generation by Sports Blogs

This study looked at four major means by which a blog could generate revenue: donations, selling, advertising, and network support. Only three of the sports blogs accepted donations of any kind to support the blog and used PayPal or Amazon Payments as their broker; this is a lower percentage than the overall statistics for the complete sample size (for reference, blogs that were political in content had the highest percentage of donations at nearly sixty percent). Understanding donor motivations is important for bloggers that choose to use this funding method. For example, Tsiotsou (2007) found four motivational factors usually considered by donors when giving to athletic programs: (a) belongingness, (b) trusting, (c) prestige, and (d)

social and practical motivation. Therefore, bloggers should have a good understanding of framing when creating messages for their consumers. Information providers use framing to "influence decisions without distorting information" (Peters et al., 2006, p. 407). Much of the extant literature in framing has looked at the psychological motives of individuals (see Zolner et al., 2010; Gladden et al., 2005; Mahony, Gladden, and Funk, 2003). For example, Grau and Folse (2007) found positive framing messages encourage favorable outcomes with consumers.

Three of the blogs sampled had premium content that could only be accessed via a subscription. Half of the blogs had an online store set-up that sold items that were usually related to sports or the blog, e.g. coffee cups emblazoned with blog logo or name. These two types of revenue generating activities are likely playing on the emotional connection readers have with the blogger. For example, readers that purchase these subscriptions and merchandise are likely avid followers of the blog, the sport, or the issue being discussed on a regular basis. Drawing from social identity theory, which suggests consumers behave in a way the supports the identity they have in their social relationships, bloggers can see that their avid followers may wish to identify with them (and fellow readers of the blog) through the purchase of licensed merchandise.

All of the sampled sports blogs used advertising to help support the blog with a majority of the blogs (58.3%) having three or less advertisements embedded in the site. However, five of the blogs contained anywhere from six to thirteen advertisements during the twenty-four hour period in which sampling was conducted. While a majority of bloggers use this method of revenue generation, their primary concerns should be with the noise created from a cluttered page. Issues with readability, especially on a mobile device, come into question when too many advertisements appear on a page. Bloggers should balance the obvious monetary benefit of advertisements with the effect it will have on consumers.

Nineteen of the blogs were either connected to one of the traditional mainstream media sites (ex. ESPN) or were part of a blogging network (predominantly SBNation). There are both positive and negative sides to having network support. On the positive side, bloggers have the notoriety of a network that has a following on its own. On the negative side, there is autonomy lost in some cases (e.g. topic of stories, blog layout, and other creative decisions).

Social Media and Sports Blogs

While blogging itself is a social media, the study was also interested in how much the sports blogosphere employed the other social media within their blogging sites. Seventy-five percent of the blogs used some form of social media with their posts to share those posts with other blogs or readers. Nearly forty percent of the blogs used a Twitter account along with their blog; this is an area that was surprising to the researchers since our expectation was that the percentage would be much higher due to the popularity of posting on Twitter while sports events are happening. A minority also used MySpace (5%) and Facebook (33%) accounts to tie in with their blog posts. None of the sports blogs used LinkedIn, which is not unexpected due to its use as a recruiting and networking tool for more business to business situations. However, it may be advantageous for bloggers (especially those looking for career opportunities) to exhibit some of their writing on LinkedIn as another way to showcase their work.

A majority (54.2%) of the blogs used at least three of the social bookmarking services to share posts with other websites, while two of the sports blogs used flickr to share photographs and images with their readers. Over sixty percent of the blogs contained an embedded video or a

link/embed to YouTube, normally highlighting an outstanding or controversial play or using a video to support a perspective being discussed on the blog. Nearly all of the blogs (91.7%) utilized RSS (Really Simply Syndication), while two of the blogs contained podcasts as a regular feature of the blog. For an explanation of social media terms please refer to Table 1: Technology and Social Media Terms.

Table 1: Technology and Social Media Terms

Type of Social Media	Explanation	Examples
Social Networking	Share and communicate personal and business information	Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn
Microblogging	Blogging that is text based (around 140 characters or less)	Twitter, friendfeed, tumblr, microblogr
Media Sites	Sharing various types of media, especially videos and photographs	YouTube, flickr
RSS	Really simple syndication	Updates from websites that are sent to your computer
Social Bookmarking or News	Rating of news stories as either "like" or 'dislike'	del.icio.us, StumbleUpon, digg
Permalink	Permanent link that points to a specific entry on a blog	Will be noted on the website as a permalink
Trackback	System used to notify when another website has linked to the author's entry on a website	This allows authors to keep track of who is linking or commenting on their writing

The Online Community and Sports Blogs

Over sixty percent of the blogs were run by a group of bloggers with the remaining thirty percent run by an individual. Nearly seventy percent of the blogs had nine or less posts in a twenty four hour period, with an average of 11 posts per day for the sample. Five of the blogs sampled had over twenty posts per day, which raised the overall average of the group. It is not unexpected given the time and effort needed to find or write content for the blog that those blogs with a high number of posts per day were normally run by a group of bloggers and not by an individual. Over eighty percent of the blogs had a featured post of the day, which was either pinned to the top of the blog for the day or emphasized by the design of the blog. Most of the blogs did not use Trackback or Permalink features, but only two of the blogs did not allow comments by readers of the blogs. Given the passionate nature of many sports fan, it would seem logical to allow comments and even encourage comments by the readers of the blog. Most of the blogs did not have a mobile app for their blog- the five blogs which did have a mobile app were on the higher end of the rankings of blog traffic. Thirty percent of the blogs features either a game or a contest or a poll on the blog; polling was the most prevalent of the three items on sports blogs.

Polls consisted of topics such as what round of the draft a certain player might be selected or what was the best play in a game. Only two of the blogs contained widgets and none of the blogs featured online radio. Over half of the blogs had fifty or more links to other blogs or Internet sites, while twenty percent of the blogs had eighty or more links contained in the blog. A strong (and logical) correlation existed (Pearson's R=.432, significance=.035) between the number of links the blog possessed and the amount of traffic to the blog itself. It would have been interesting to break down the data into subgroups and re-run the correlation statistics, but a larger sample size would be needed for that to occur. The number of links that a website possesses improves the search engine rankings for a website; this study partially supports that search engine optimization tactic (SEO) for sports blogs. It is only partially supported since there are other SEO tactics besides number of links that improve rankings. Half of the blogs sampled had been established between one and four years at the time of data collection.

Research Limitations

The sports blog dataset was pulled from a much larger data set of 250 blogs that contained many blogs that were not sports themed, for example a tremendous number dealt with political issues or were focused on technology. From this experience to obtain a larger sample size the sampling set would need to feature only sports blogs and not be a subset of a larger database of various types of blogs. The sample of sports blogs used in this study was done in the spring, which meant that most of the blogs featured in this study were either focused on baseball or basketball with a few discussing the pro football draft or the Super Bowl. In the future to have a true representative sample of sports blogs, the sampling time period would need to be longitudinal encompassing the whole calendar year. The exception to this being if one desired to focus on a specific sport, then the sampling timeframe could be narrowed down to a smaller time period. This sample did not deal with looking at the actual content of microblogs (e.g. Twitter) as the content analysis would be better served sampling web based blogs and noting the absence or presence of Twitter account and feeds on those blogs as opposed to the limited information that would be found on a Twitter account. A completely different sample along with an abbreviated and revised observation form would need to be utilized for a microblog sample. A concentrated sample of sports blogs would also allow for more specific coding dealing with the various sports versus just an overall label of being a sports themed blog. Furthermore if a blog also contained posts covering more than one type of sport, then that information could be coded as well, e.g. a majority focus on college football, but an occasional focus on pro football or a specific team.

Implications and Conclusion

This research study illustrates the characteristics that currently compose the most popular sports blogs in the Internet realm. This is useful information for anyone, or any company, who wishes to enter the blogosphere to know the tools that the currently successful blogs are utilizing. For those blogs that currently exist, it gives a snapshot as to what tools competing blogs are utilizing. The blogging world is a highly networked place with a majority of the tools geared to either linking other sites to the blog or to reaching new markets (readers) to pull into the new blog readership. The new blog readership will increase circulation figures for the blog making the blog more valuable to advertisers and to other related blogs and blogging networks. The social media will continue to play an important role in the blogosphere helping to either add a multimedia flavor through video or audio or to add another communication channel, like twitter or tumblr, into the mix to draw blog traffic and interest.

Future research should examine the influence revenue generating mechanisms have on consumers likelihood to return to a site. Consumer perception studies on differences in the various methods may shed light on what causes a reader to support a blogger. It would also be helpful to investigate what mega events impact sports blogs? For example, during mega sporting events, such as the Olympics or the World Cup, do blogger posting behavior, as well as readership? Overall, like its varied fan base, the sports blogosphere is a very diverse place of opinion and tools with each blog having its own unique flavor of technology and communication to offer its audience.

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