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## Playing on the Communication and Sport Field: Dispositions, Challenges, and Priorities

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## **Playing on the Communication and Sport Field: Dispositions, Challenges, and Priorities**

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### ***Abstract***

This chapter considers the origins, development, and epistemological contexts undergirding the study of communication and sport as an emergent and growing field of inquiry. Early in the chapter, the contexts underlying the development of studying sport in communication and media studies are considered and woven into a brief chronology of the area's maturation towards disciplinary legitimacy. This is followed by an analysis of the challenges presented by competing and complementary interests at play in three disciplinary and epistemological dispositions seen in the study of communication and sport. The closing section of the chapter considers key challenges that need to be met in further developing the study of communication and sport along with some priorities that need to be focused upon for the area to extend its impact.

### ***Keywords***

sport communication, mediated sport, media studies, sociology of sport, sport management, communication studies, epistemology

**Word Count:** 8125 body/957 references

# **Playing on the Communication and Sport Field: Dispositions, Challenges, and Priorities**

## **1 Introduction**

There have many indicators over the last few years that the study of communication and sport has become one of the new “hot areas” in communication and media studies. Foremost, with three scholarly journals—the *Journal of Sports Media*, the *International Journal of Sport Communication*, and *Communication and Sport*—now being published in this academic space and with all of the major communication and media scholarly organizations (c.f., Wenner, 2015a) now recognizing the nexus of communication and sport in their infrastructures, the time has come for taking communication *in* and *about* sport seriously. Yet, for some of us who have long endeavored to make the case to the communication and media studies scholarly communities that the communicative contexts of sport are integral, rather than peripheral, to any broad understandings of communication and culture, this has been a decidedly slow journey, one that has required overcoming a tepid reception and some resistance from the discipline’s mainstream (c.f., Wenner, 2006).

Still, it is clear that ignition has taken place recently in enough places such that a tipping point has been reached about the worthiness of studying the nexus of communication and sport. While the answers as to why sport has only recently been “discovered” by mainstream communication and media studies are complex, its long and winding road to disciplinary acceptance begs the joking observation that it has only taken thirty or forty years for the study of communication and sport to have become an overnight success. This chapter offers some reflections on this “overnight success” and its outfall in the resultant state of affairs. As we experience this newfound legitimacy, what does the study of communication and sport look like? What is the state of play on the communication and sport field(s)? What are its contours and who is on the playing field and why? Can there be coherence amidst the competing dispositions that have taken shape in approaching communication and sport? What challenges do scholars have in moving forward on a meaningful research agenda? What should our priorities be? In offering answers to questions such as these, this chapter aims to clarify thinking about some fruitful pathways for the future study of communication and sport.

## **2 Contexts**

Today, it is obvious that the business of sport and its cultural and social impacts are huge, not just in developed countries, but throughout the world. In hindsight, it is easily recognized that much of the drive towards this “hugeness” was facilitated through the symbiotic marriage of sport and television, a foundational building block of what is more broadly recognized as the “media-sport-culture complex” (Jhally, 1989) or, more simply, “mediasport” (Wenner, 1998). Indeed, it is easy to make the argument that there could be no truly big-time sport without big-time media. The rise of professional sports leagues, the professionalization of “amateur” athletics, the creation of today’s outsized sporting mega-events (Wenner & Billings, 2017), and the routine imbuing of sports heroes with the cachet of celebrity (Smart, 2005) are all attributable to what Jackson (2013) has called a “circuit of commodification and communication model” where marketing and promotional communication plays a central role.

While today it seems unimaginable that any meaningful study of sport and society could be possible without understanding the workings of communication and media, sport studies across the academy developed in disparate quarters with only occasional, usually isolated, study in communication (c.f., Bryant, Comisky & Zillmann, 1977; Parente, 1977; Real, 1975; Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1979). As a stable component in maturing articulations of physical education in the 1960s and 1970s rebranded under the guise of kinesiology, exercise and sport science, human movement studies and the like, the socio-cultural study of sport developed in ways that paralleled approaches to sport in society that were gaining legitimacy in sociology. During that same period of time, the study of sport saw niche development that remains to this day across the social sciences and humanities. Much developed beyond a sociology of sport approach, which itself evolved to be both “more than sociology” and “more than sport” (Wenner, 2017b). Sustained attention on engagement with sport came from psychology where a

substantial line of research on fanship (c.f., Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001) built on early inquiry on spectator experience (Hasdorf & Cantril, 1954) developed alongside a more pragmatic focus on how to stimulate motivation in a way that would optimize athletic performance. Other pragmatics, those having to do with the growing of the sport marketplace, came from other quarters of the academy. Here the study of sport business, economics, leadership and organization coalesced into sport management with contributions from business schools, economics, and early articulations of sport administration in physical education. And while the study of sport gained early footholds across a host of disciplines that included history, philosophy, ethics, law, politics, policy, literature and other fields, it struggled to find its footing in communication and media studies. As a result, as late as the 1980s and 1990s, communication and media studies researchers looking to find a warm reception for their nascent work on sport necessarily engaged with scholarly societies in the sociology of sport, such as the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport and the International Sociology of Sport Association, and scholarly journals such as the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, and the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, which were welcoming to research recognizing the increasing importance of media in shaping and experiencing contemporary sport (Wenner, 2015b).

Even as sport studies gained standing across the academy in the last third of the twentieth century, inquiry concerning sport failed to gain meaningful momentum in communication and media studies until the new millennium. Even as late as the 1990s, resistance came from received sensibilities in “mass communication research” (the normative precursor to the now more broadly defined “media studies” that includes critical entailments), while there was seeming indifference to the sporting context across disparate quarters of “communication studies” (c.f., Kassing et al., 2004, Wenner, 1989). This tepid reception was in some sense an understandable example of communication and media studies, as relatively new disciplines, looking to establish their credentials in the social sciences by focusing on what normatively seemed more important matters. In the 1960s and 1970s, the study of communication, although having long antecedents in study of rhetoric, was striving to establish its own legitimacy through using empirical social science methods to study processes and impacts of communication and media. Towards that goal, priorities were focused on more appropriate “serious” matters (media effects, socialization, political influence, agenda-setting, cultivation, stereotypes, psychological and group processes amongst them) than sport as a way for communication scholars to more swiftly advance their legitimacy (Wenner, 2015b).

With the coming of cultural studies (and the influence of Stuart Hall and the Birmingham school) to communication (which lagged in being embraced in U.S. communication and media studies), cases were made for the importance and legitimacy of studying the popular (including sport) in communicative contexts (c.f., Buscombe, 1975; Jhally, 1989; Whannel, 1983). Thus, it may be said that it took until the study of the popular actually became popular in communication and media studies for the sporting nexus to begin to draw meaningful interest. In the mid- to late-1980s, key publications by Whannel (1983) and Wenner (1989) laid important groundwork for legitimizing the study of mediated sport from both cultural-critical and empirical social science perspectives. The 1990s saw both the continued interest in the communication and sport nexus by a growing set of scholars in the sociology of sport community and a blossoming of interest in communication and media studies that was fueled by influential book-length treatments such as those by Whannel (1992), Trujillo (1994), Wenner (1998), and Rowe (1999). Importantly, the early 1990s also brought the first example of institutionalized legitimacy for mediated sport inquiry within communication as the International Association for Media and Communication Research established its media and sport section (Wenner, 2015b).

The new millennium brought important “tipping point” publications in premier handbooks. Key amongst those, published in a benchmark sport studies handbook, Whannel (2000) advanced a strong case for studying mediated sport as essential to socio-cultural understandings of sport. Even more influential to the broader terroir of communication was a landmark treatise coming from a diverse group of early career scholars from across communication and media studies (Kassing et al., 2004) that made a case for the importance of studying communicative processes and settings entailed in “enacting, (re)producing, consuming, and organizing sport” in ways that reached beyond the mediated contexts that had dominated

inquiry up to that point. A pattern of other markers signaled that communication and sport inquiry was coming of age. Important handbooks were published (Raney & Bryant, 2006; Pedersen, 2013; Billings & Hardin, 2014) and the area's first textbooks (Billings, Butterworth, & Turman, 2012; Kennedy & Hills, 2009; Rowe, 1999) facilitated curricular development.

Following on efforts by a group of scholars to find a “place to call home,” a series of informally organized Summits on Communication and Sport began in 2002, stimulating institutional legitimacy and the formation of interest groups and divisions in mainstream communication and media studies organizations. First in 2008 came the Broadcast Communication Association, with a parade of formations following in the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in 2010, the International Communication Association in 2013 and the National Communication Association in 2015. In the midst of this signing of institutional legitimacy, in 2012, the scholarly community that came together by necessity around a series of Summits on Communication and Sport made a home of its own by establishing a freestanding scholarly society, the International Association for Communication and Sport. (Wenner, 2015a, 2015b).

Paralleling these institutional formations, scholarly journals focused on the communication and sport nexus were launched. First published on a limited schedule in 2007, the *Journal of Sports Media* tended towards a focus on journalism and public relations practice. In 2008, the publication of the area's first quarterly scholarly journal, the *International Journal of Sport Communication* was driven, in part, by rising interest about communication and sport in sport management and, while publishing diverse work, maintained a focus on strategic sport communication and professional practice. In 2013, with a focus on the social and cultural dynamics of communication and sport, and explicitly looking to include research on interpersonal, group, and organizational communication in addition to work focused on mediated sport, *Communication and Sport* began quarterly publication. The reception of that journal, signaled by a 2017 expansion of its production schedule to six issues a year to accommodate blooming interest in the area and garnering recognition with a PROSE Award as the Best New Journal in the Social Sciences, suggests that the study of communication and sport had both come of age and achieved long sought-after disciplinary legitimacy (Wenner, 2017a). Taken in light of the contextual chronology presented here, it is clear that communication and sport has “come a long way baby.” Yet, while we have arrived, where are we exactly? What follows is an assessment of where we seem to be on the playing fields of communication and sport.

### **3 Dispositions**

Having made progress along a number of fronts to gain standing, the “mo” is no longer slow for the study of communication and sport. The moment, however, begs a good look in the mirror to assess where things stand. Is the area on a “sustainable path” to facilitate growth and influence? Is it heading on a trajectory towards becoming a coherent field of inquiry? Or does “the field” really just consist of epistemologically different “fields of play” with offset objectives, priorities, and levels of development? Earlier analyses (Wenner, 2015a, Wenner, 2017a) suggest that three disciplinarily distinct dispositions co-exist within the communication and sport scholarly space: (1) Media, Sports, and Society, (2) Sport Communication as a Profession, and (3) Communication Studies and Sport. While certainly some points of overlap may exist in a Venn diagram rendering of the three areas, they may be sufficiently epistemologically distinct enough to pose risks to broader dialogue and disciplinary coherence. An analysis of the state of each of these three dispositions, their epistemological core, and the issues they confront in development follows.

#### **3.1 Media, Sports, and Society**

The Media, Sports, and Society disposition is both the most longstanding and widely adopted orientation to study of mediated sport. Serving as an early port of entry for sociology of sport inquiry into the sport and media nexus and as a driver for the first forays into studying sport in communication and media studies (Wenner, 1989, 2006), the main practitioners today come from those domains, along with some seated in sport management. The disposition necessarily requires engaging interdisciplinarity and understandings of both sport's organization and socio-cultural functioning and communication processes

and effects. Indeed, early work may be seen as a mashup of the social problems orientation that underlies much sociological inquiry and the once dominant mass communication research tradition that embraced a social-psychological orientation in studying the processing of media content and its impacts. More recently, with the coming of cultural studies, the disposition has expanded to include diverse critical-cultural lenses and qualitative approaches seen across the humanities and social sciences.

Most researchers using this disposition tend to situate their work within one of the three classic components used to characterize the communication process: (1) senders/institutions/production/encoding, (2) messages/content/texts/representation/signification, and (3) receivers/audiences/fandom/consumption/decoding, and it is not unusual to see compendiums of work in this area to be organized into sections reflecting these foci (c.f., Wenner, 1989, 1998). Speaking to a deficiency seen more broadly across media studies and mass communication research, critiques of the area often cite a need for research to bridge two or more of these areas in individual studies, to adopt what Hall (1973) has advocated for in his more holistically dynamic encoding/decoding model or engage Giddens' (1984) structuration model to gain a more fluid understanding of the dynamism inherent in communication processes, but the pragmatics of research design have limited how often this is done (Wenner, 2015a).

A good deal is shared under the relatively large umbrella of the Media, Sports, and Society disposition. Much of its thrust has grown from a core concern, initiated in early sociology of sport inquiry, about the outsized role that media seemed to be making in the social and cultural dynamic *in and around* sport. The area continues to be dominated by overarching concerns about the impacts of sports media on individual and societal levels, including the ways in which mediated sport sets the agenda for thinking about sport and how media and sport "logics" (Altheide & Snow, 1979) intermix to influence a set of issues central to understanding identities and politics. Perhaps understandably, much inquiry in the Media, Sports, and Society disposition is driven by fundamental concerns over issues of fairness, equity, and the power to shape beliefs and cultural priorities. Issues given attention from this disposition include stereotyped or imbalanced gender and racial/ethnic portrayals, narratives that stress tilted nationalistic biases, and harms that may come from the inappropriate wielding of power in a political economy that seeks to leverage advantage from the "marriage" of sport and media organizations and institutions. Derivative of that marriage, other key foci include examinations of the cultures of sport and media workers and the pressures to produce product that will heighten significance and influence meanings. A key target of that political economy, the engagement (both functions and dysfunctions) of and selling to audiences and spectators in mediated sport, has similarly been a longstanding concern from this disposition.

While much is shared within the Media, Sport, and Society disposition, its coherence is challenged by being comprised of two distinct epistemological "houses" with very different sensibilities, tendencies, and shortcomings. One house features a media studies/cultural studies orientation, focusing critical lenses on the "media-sport-culture complex" (Jhally, 1989). Seated in social theories of cultural power and relying on qualitative methods, particular attention is given to inequities in representation, problematics in hypercommodification, and the political repercussions of mediated sport on lived experience. Key shortcomings in a cultural/critical approach to mediated sport stem from the challenges of accessibility that come with reliance on obtuse (and too often poorly understood and/or unpacked) continental social theory, showy but sometimes amorphous jargon, simplistic and pre-ordained political sensibilities that cloud dispassionate analysis, and qualitative methods that offer little generalizability.

A contrasting house of inquiry within the Media, Sports, and Society disposition relies on the traditions of "mass communication research" and social-psychology in a more "scienticized" and detached approach to many of the same social and cultural issues of concern to critical scholars. Here there is a distancing (often to the point of obliviousness and avoidance) from the arguably necessarily politicized contexts of mediated sport in pursuit of process-oriented answers about uses and effects. While such distancing is perhaps necessary in the employ of the tools and tactics of empirical social science, both distancing and tactics come with shortcomings. Empirical measurement and generalizability are both experiencing challenging times. Building standardized scales in a fluid media and sport ecosystem ripe

with technological change and disruptions, obtaining clearances from institutional review boards for experimental manipulations, and challenges of garnering the truly random samples in survey research remain considerable obstacles. The latter matter portends to destabilize much that undergirds generalizability and replicability. With increased pressures on publishing, pragmatic reliance on “convenience” samples, from undergraduate student populations to the self-selecting (and often paid) respondents polled through online services such as Survey Monkey and Amazon Turk, is understandable. Unfortunately, along with such “conveniences” come breaches in reliability and validity as stable statistical inference is predicated on random sampling.

While the differences between the two houses within the Media, Sports, and Society disposition, and the challenges they face, are not unique to the study of communication and sport, the fissure they demarcate between scholars working from the cultural/critical humanities and the empirical social sciences can be considerable. There is no question that this induces a bit of “babble” into potentially fruitful dialogue between different scholarly communities working within the Media, Sports, and Society disposition, even though they may share much in common in terms of interests. Beyond tendencies to stay in one’s “comfort zone,” these are competing houses, with different epistemological foundations that may fuel antipathies. As a result, dialogue between them may be elusive, taking place instead within the silos of each house, and magnifying risks of side-by-side communities *talking past* rather than *talking to* each other.

Beyond these fundamental fissures, work from the Media, Sports, and Society disposition features other tendencies that need some redress. Understandable, given the pragmatics and increased pressures of publishing in scholarly careers, has been the disproportional focus on mediated sport content. Given the appeal of “doing the easy stuff first,” ready access to abundant mediated sport content has resulted in a plethora of studies analyzing and critiquing mediated sport content and texts. As low-hanging fruit, the draw to texts that so often vividly illustrate socio-cultural inequities and harms evident in sport is understandable. Still, more difficult work that reveals the leap from content to its negotiation and effect, and most particularly, on research that reveals how that content comes to be as it is, has notably lagged.

Studies of the forces at play in the “why and how” of producing mediated sport content are infrequently seen. Done well (c.f., Billings, 2008; Serazio, 2019) such studies can reveal much about the dynamics and values that drive the mediated sport marketplace and shape its institutions, professional climate, and received practices. Similarly, research on audiences, spectatorship, and fandom, which requires overcoming more obstacles than content-centered analysis, has lagged. Gaining access, garnering samples that support generalizability, and doing sufficiently broad and deep observation and interviewing in qualitative work are all more challenging than making something of content alone. Clearly, more and more meaningful work needs to be done on the reception and interpretation of mediated sport content and the range of effects to be explored needs to be broadened. Beyond these structural challenges, work emanating from the Media, Sports, and Society disposition, driven as it is from heartfelt concerns with fairness, inequities, effects and abuses of power and anchored in both social and social-psychological theories, can struggle with having “real-world” sensitivities to pragmatics and applications. The “real-world,” at least as seen through the lens of the marketplace, drives the Sport Communication as a Profession disposition is considered next.

### **3.2 Sport Communication as a Profession**

With very different priorities, the Sport Communication as a Profession disposition is very much anchored in valuing a real-world orientation. Yet, in having core concerns with the pragmatics of practice, strategies, and effectiveness in the sport marketplace, the disposition risks having structural blinders that can tint priorities in the search for knowledge and limit interpretation of findings. Anchored as it is in professionalism and the functioning of sport communication in the marketplace, the “real-world” that is often assumed comes from a received view of the world as a given. In this worldview construction, the marketplace is preeminent, seen as both normal and valuable, worthy of advancement, and a place where citizens are often more likely to be framed as consumers. This seems an inescapable epistemological

characteristic of most marketplace-focused professional disciplines and is evident in the two strains that comprise the Sport Communication as Profession disposition.

The roots of this disposition can be seen arising from two quarters of the academy. One, from the communication and media studies side of the house, developed in professionally-oriented programs in journalism and broadcasting and their concerns with standards of practice and effectiveness in sports reporting, broadcasting, public relations, and advertising. Second, with development largely coterminous with those in sport-focused media education, came a focus on strategic sport communication (Pedersen, Laucella, Kian, & Guerin, 2016). Seated, in the main, in programs in sport administration and management, which have had recent burgeoning success within academic units conceptualized as physical education, kinesiology, exercise and sport science and the like, there is conceptual overlap with the sport-focused promotional communication concerns as situated within media education.

Still, there are inflection-point differences that may make a difference between these two variants. In the articulation of strategic sport communication as seated in the domain of sport management, sport and its strategic management, of which communication is a part, are chief concerns. As seated in communication and media studies programs, the processes of effective and appealing communication, applications of which may be focused on sport settings, serve as the chief points of departure. Although what is shared between the two is a focus on professional practice, as seated in sport management, the lens foremost puts administrative, managerial, professional effectiveness and their service to sport and media organization atop priorities. Certainly, a focus on such priorities in the context of the norms of professional education may be eminently defensible.

Yet, while studies from the vantage point of the Sport Communication as a Profession disposition obviously need to engage the dynamics of “communication processes,” and there is room to be sure for theoretical engagement, even to the point of using critical lenses on engaging studies of professional cultures and questions of social impact, as seated in sport management, there is an overarching concern with “effectiveness.” It is inescapable at a foundational level that sport management as a field is about the institutional and marketplace advancement of sport, the building of organizations, brands, franchises, and ultimately, profit. This is not to say that there is no room from this disposition to consider matters of social harm and inequity that are central to a Media, Sports, and Society disposition, but these are clearly secondary concerns. These are most typically dwarfed by the posited value of research to sport and media organizations and its relevance to developing skills and strategies to advance professional practices in a way that will be well received in and grow marketplaces around sport and its communication.

Herein lies a key conundrum underlying sport management research, including work focused on sport communication. Too often the rationale or mandate used to justify inquiry is centered, in many cases exclusively so, on the goal of helping sport managers and marketers advance the reach and reception of their wares. And while this may at times seem to be anchored in achieving a more enjoyable or “better” spectator, fan, or customer experience, even that end goal is almost always at one with advancing the yield of those holding power in the sport marketplace. Thus, in a fundamental sense, a quiet and seemingly little questioned political world view underlies research from the Sport Communication as a Profession disposition as it is most likely to be approached from sport management. Beyond being a seemingly inadequate and arguably debased theoretical posture from which to pursue scholarly knowledge, it has, hegemonically, resulted in scholars willingly serving as *de facto* unpaid research assistants for sport and media organizations in their search to capitalize on sport communication. And while that helping the industry rationale is a common driver of inquiry, it may be specious as there is scant evidence to suggest that the sport or media industry has asked for help through these studies or actually used their findings in marketplace applications.

Sport communication, as situated in sport management, may be seen as part of a larger toolkit of tools used to gain more information and strategically grow sport. Sport is seen not so much as a sociocultural practice, but rather as a given, a naturalized product to be advanced not interrogated. This is true also in sport public relations and advertising coursework seated in communication and media studies

units. Here training comes in using the tools of the trade to advance the interests of sport organizations and events, and of course those of its “sponsors” and partners, including media organizations.

This disposition to be “friendly” to sport, a posture that makes the everyday doing of sports coverage a bit easier, can be a pervasive received logic in sport journalism and broadcasting academic sensibilities as well. Certainly, in the doing of day-to-day sports reporting, there is little time or place to question the importance and heralded values of sport which are perceived to be shared by fans that comprise readership and audiences. Indeed, reporters or broadcasters who regularly question or criticize the sporting *status quo* may risk compromising their access to the insider information and gossip that both brings value to and fans the flames of fanship. In a very basic sense, fanning those flames enables the market for sport journalism to be well-received and grow, which of course, is in the self-serving best interests of reporters and broadcasters, with side benefits extending to academics building careers through research focused on growing the sport marketplace. A bottom line truism is that there can be no sport journalism without sport, and bigger, stronger, more important, and well-received sport is also good for the health of sport journalists and academics alike.

This “friendliness” to sport and an entrenched *de facto* fanship orientation that pervasively underlies much sports reporting has undoubtedly contributed to frequent “toy department” characterizations of sport journalism (Rowe, 2007). Yet, in sport broadcasting, the orientation frame advances from one of merely just being in a “toy department” stocked with sport to becoming partners with sport entities. Having paid increasingly exorbitant rights to air sport contests, broadcast and cable companies look to sell their productions to both consumers and marketers for the highest price possible. This brings a structural imperative to polish the sports product they are offering and avoid diminishing its appeal in any way that can “soil” its marketability. For broadcasters, the resultant necessity of “being in bed” with sport organizations facilitates a “sports first” obligation as this mutual benefice drives value and profit. This structural impropriety that yields close bedfellows is magnified further when the broadcasters who “cover” sport are actually paid by a sport organization rather than the media entity, a state of affairs common in professional sports. In sum, the pressures and conflicts rife in the professional and marketplace relationships between sport and media are considerable and they necessarily extend to logics in academic milieus where a Sport Communication as a Profession disposition focuses on the pragmatics of “successful” professional practice and/or growing the sport marketplace.

### 3.3 Communication Studies and Sport

Coming into definition in the new millennium, a third discernable but clearly less developed disposition, anchored in traditions and concerns central to “communication studies,” has evolved to broaden what heretofore has been a media-centric focus undergirding the first two dispositions. Although at first glance, the Communication Studies and Sport disposition may seem to share little with the Sport Communication as a Profession disposition, the approach may be seen in many ways as a complementary extension of the Media, Sport, and Society disposition, focusing on the communicative dynamics *in* and *about* sport that are not explicitly anchored in or driven by the media interface. In this sense, this disposition begs for what is really an “impossible” modifier—non-mediated—to distinguish its framing and focus. The scholarly community forming around the Communication Studies and Sport disposition tend to bring a “personal” or “human,” rather than “media,” orientation to the study of communication. Stemming from speech acts, speech communication, and communication sciences traditions, core concerns with interpersonal, group, organizational and other communication settings, along with the communicative dynamics of leadership and management, come to the fore (c.f., Kassing et al., 2004).

As well, the Communication Studies and Sport disposition distinguishes itself from the other two dispositions by heightened concerns over the use of language and symbols in sport settings and to frame cultural assertions and societal understandings about sport and its meanings. As the employ of language and symbols are necessary to fashioning rhetoric in sporting contexts, a key component within the Communication Studies and Sport disposition is genealogically anchored in rhetorical studies and criticism. As the study of rhetoric has always been relatively agnostic as to forms of delivery, rhetorical criticism has long left its mark on the critical-cultural studies side of the Media, Sports, and Society

disposition as it is inescapable that a goodly amount of rhetoric in the sporting context reaches public view through the media. This reality, along with unavoidable reality that “personal” communication in dyadic, group, organizational and other “human-centered” settings may be influenced by or transmitted through media, often make the “non-mediated” modifier to the Communication Studies and Sport disposition spoken to above technically “impossible.”

As human communication contexts and processes are central to approaching sport from this disposition, its more laggardly development is in some sense understandable. After all, there are many contexts for human communication study, from political, health, familial, organizational settings that may be seen to have broader significance for society for researchers schooled in communication studies traditions. Here, sport settings may be viewed as a more delimited communicative context. In contrast, the institutionalization, growth, and impacts of outsized industries, mediated sports industries for the Media, Sport, and Society disposition and sport industries for the Sport Communication as a Profession dispositions, writ proportionally larger on the disciplinary landscapes of media studies and sport management. That mediated sport was seen as “big time” and influential drew early attention across sport studies, both in the sociology of sport and in sport management, and while this laid track for legitimacy in media studies, it didn’t stimulate the study of human communication processes in sport.

Yet, the focus on the human communication contexts and processes that is central to approaching sport from the Communication Studies and Sport disposition has much to offer to enrich and extend work not only from the two more established dispositions but also, more broadly, in sport sociology and psychology. For example, as approached from communication studies, core starting point concerns with human communication processes can facilitate the study of leadership, organization, management and their cultures without being preoccupied by overarching concerns with effectiveness, the bottom line, and the strategic advance of enterprise. While these are matters that are central to the Sport Communication as a Profession disposition, they may draw the ire of critical-cultural scholars, as well as those embracing a social-scientific paradigm for its detachment, for tainting too much of the drive of research by prioritizing the beneficences to the marketplace.

Similarly, in obvious ways, advancing the interface of the Communication Studies and Sport disposition with core concerns in the sociology of sport and sport psychology holds considerable promise. For the sociology of sport, engaged focus on the processes of the non-mediated communicative dynamics within and about sport (Billings et al., 2012, Kassing et al., 2004) will deepen understandings of sport organizations, leadership, cultures, and subcultures. Similarly, for an area such as sport psychology, which has a goodly interest in how to optimize athletic performance, better understandings of communication processes will undoubtedly yield improvements in mindset and motivation that can help advance competitive results. Bringing a Communication Studies and Sport disposition to other areas such as coaching or how communication in and about sport is transacted within particular contexts, such as between members of a family or an athletic team, can help meld research lines in diverse areas. It is easy to see how communication is at the heart of the coaching enterprise (Cranmer, 2020) with its effectiveness a chief concern of sport psychology (Nicholls, 2017) and an understanding of its cultures and values central to inquiry in the sociology of sport (Potrac, Gilbert & Denison, 2015).

Still, at this juncture, while research stemming from the Communication Studies and Sport disposition holds much promise to shine light across broad swatches of communicative contexts that intersect with sport, interest is comparatively nascent, with coherent lines of inquiry far less developed when compared to the relative robustness of bodies of work stemming from the other two dispositions with longer standing interests in sport. While foundational to the speech acts traditions undergirding communication studies, rhetorical criticism focused on sporting contexts (Brummett, 2009) has seen the most development, but because the most available sporting rhetorics in contemporary times are mediated and because rhetorical criticism and critical lenses in cultural studies often come together, much rhetorical criticism of sport can be seen as (or more) relevant to the Media, Sports, and Society disposition. Similarly, a related area that has received attention, the communicative dynamics of athlete image repair (c.f., Blaney, Lippert, & Smith, 2012), because of its bridged focus on communication process and rhetoric used within that frame, would seem at its core to fit best within the Communication Studies and

Sport disposition. But, as another example of what Geertz (1973) has called “blurred genres,” in practice, research on athlete image repair, as easily fits the Media, Sports, and Society disposition as rhetorical attempts at repair are necessarily reliant on media to sway public sympathies or the Sport Communication as a Profession disposition as repair strategies reside clearly in the crisis management toolkits of public relations practitioners. This is all to say that while the Communication Studies and Sport disposition has seen lesser development, its potential to fill gaps in understanding and reach across the aisles to bridge established lines of inquiry is considerable.

#### **4 Challenges and Priorities**

The meta-level analyses here of the three dispositions at play across the fields of communication and sport inquiry point to a number of challenges that need to be met to advance a growing and inherently disciplinary area. Addressing these challenges and prioritizing some matters within the scholarly communities will be key in the area being able to broaden its impact and engage meaningful dialogues about the roles that communication in and about sport may play in larger social, cultural, and political power dynamics. In the following sections, an analysis of both those challenges and matters that need prioritization is structured by considering four “Cs”: (1) coherence, (2) core, (3) community, and (4) contagion.

##### **4.1 Coherence**

This essay began by asking series of questions about the state of development of communication and sport as a new “hot area.” Clearly, inquiry about this nexus has accelerated and most notably gained long sought-after acceptance and legitimacy across a swatch of communication and media studies scholarly organizations. Three dedicated research journals and a handful of academic book series now populate this scholarly space. With such development thusly advanced, what can be made of the “there” that is “there”? Fundamental questions undergirding this essay asked whether there can be coherence amidst the competing dispositions at play on the communication and sport academic field. Are we headed on a trajectory towards becoming a coherent field of inquiry or is the area really just comprised of three different epistemological fields of play?

The most honest, but of course ultimately unsatisfying, answer to the latter question is “yes.” But this is true also of correct “all of the above” answers to multiple choice questions and probably the best that can be done in responding to the problematics inherent in any double-barreled question such as this. The state of play, simply put, is “complicated.” The dispositions at play in the study of communication and sport are both interlocking and competing. Thus, their ultimate compatibility remains an open question. Presently, there are ever-changing points of overlap in any Venn diagram rendering of their intersections. Each point of intersection brings opportunities for defining core priorities and, over time, the largest points of intersection will likely come to define a center for “a” or “the” scholarly field of play around communication and sport.

As spoken to in the analysis above, fundamental epistemological and ontological differences amongst the dispositions present real challenges to coherence. The Media, Sports, and Society disposition, centered in inquiry from media studies and the sociology of sport, is ultimately anchored in its view of denizens of the world as “citizens.” Shared amongst its two houses, using both critical/cultural and social scientific approaches, are foundational concerns over the social and cultural priorities and effects of mediated sport. With focus on propriety and equity, the disposition features a fundamental “ethical impulse” seated in philosophical concerns over “how best to live,” the greater good, virtuous action, fairness, and the duties of mediated sport to limit harm.

In contrast, the Sport Communication as a Profession disposition, as seated both in sport management and in professional communication education’s approach to sport journalism, broadcasting, public relations and advertising, tends to see denizens of the world as “consumers.” Here, key overarching concerns, such as those over “optimizing” the consumer experience with mediated sport or practicing sport communication more “effectively,” foundationally service larger goals of advancing the market reception for sport as a product and growing the influence and bottom lines of sport and media entities in

the marketplace. Thus, in fundamental ways, this disposition is both epistemologically and ontologically distinct.

The third disposition, that of Communication Studies and Sport, has more in common with, and in a sense, may be seen as an extension of, the Media, Sports, and Society disposition. Still, anchored as it is in a communication sciences orientation with its focus on interpersonal, group, and organizational “actors” and the processes and dynamics at play in such “non-mediated” sport-centric communication settings, the Communication Studies and Sport orientation might best be characterized as a “persons” disposition, seeing denizens of the world as human beings rather than in more delimited roles as citizens or consumers. While seating rhetorical criticism largely within this disposition admittedly raises complications of the “persons” orientation more easily seen in the communication sciences, some core foci, on the rhetor and speech acts, reinforce this assessment. While less developed than the other two dispositions, the Communication Studies and Sport disposition can serve as a bridge to both the processes and effects concerns of the Media, Sports, and Society disposition and those over pragmatics and effectiveness at the heart of the Sport Communication as a Profession disposition.

## 4.2 Core

Given some fundamental differences, finding a core amongst these epistemologically distinct dispositions will be challenging. Yet, ultimately, we are, all at once, citizens, consumers, and persons in our transactions with communication and sport. While recognition of this may help in putting these together in some kind of coherent whole, the present state of affairs does not a field make. At the present moment, as suggested above, a focus on key points of overlap amongst the dispositions may be the most promising way to find the evolving centers that define a more coherent field of play for the study of communication and sport.

In this search, it is worthwhile noting that the most promising points of overlap are between the more established Media, Sports, and Society disposition and the more nascent Communication Studies and Sport disposition. The reason for this is obvious. At their cores, both put communication first, media communication in the former and “non-mediated” communication in the latter. There is more shared here between these two dispositions, both by putting communication first and also by overarching concerns with communication processes, than either share with the Sport Communication as a Profession disposition where clearly sport, and the role that sport communication plays in the health of that larger marketplace comes first. Certainly, there can be points of intersection between the two “communication first” dispositions and concerns over the functioning of sport communication to support the larger sport marketplace. But just as social and cultural concerns over sport communication are approached from time to time by those with a professionally-centered disposition, we can expect that pragmatics, especially those aimed at market health or expansion, will remain secondary concerns of the “communication first” dispositions.

In finding a core to scholarly inquiry on communication and sport, we need to realize as well that some attractive “shiny pennies” can be blinding to the point of disruption and disorientation. Here, two infatuations, one with sport and the other with new technology, need to be recognized as potential problems that may decenter what might otherwise be at the heart of communication and sport inquiry. Perhaps as sport had long been subject *non grata* in communication and media studies, new scholars who are “sport fans” may understandably be drawn to the relatively new research opportunities opened by legitimacy for communication and sport. But when scholars enter the communication and sport scholarly terrain fueled by fandom or a received view of sport that is too “rose-tinted” about its virtues, the lack of scholarly dispassion can cloud understandings. For communication and media studies-centered scholars this can be blinding to the point of not being able to see, in an unfettered way, social and cultural effects that may be problematic. For those bringing a Sport Communication as a Profession disposition, such blinders can often be seated alongside a larger received view of sport that is little questioned as endemic underlayments to knowledge production with structural biases.

A second “shiny penny” that holds risks for decentering inquiry on communication and sport has to do with overestimating the impacts of new digital and social media. In recent times, the combination of

techno-smitten researchers stimulated by the potential of Twitter and other emerging social media forms alongside pathways to “fast and easy” digital data collection (c.f. Wenner et al., 2014) has resulted in a flood of studies seated in overestimates of the power and influence of new media on communication about sport. While the “newness” of new media forms is often greeted as a “game changer,” the larger body of evidence suggests that McLuhan (1964) was right that the content and logics of new media are most often seated in old media and we underestimate their lasting power (Wenner, 2014) and the nimbleness of legacy media to “remediate” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) by incorporating and reappropriating the new in reimagined older structures. Often, the evidence suggests, the influence of dominant media remains as a rock that hits the water with new digital and social media functioning as ripples emanating from its splash serve as an echo chamber departing from the mainstream (Wenner, 2014).

### **4.3 Community**

Now that the study of communication and sport has achieved a base level of legitimacy with area-specific research journals and is recognized by institutional formations across a set of scholarly organizations, a chief challenge will be how to best grow the community of scholars that hold interest in the area. At the end of the day, even though its social-cultural, economic, and political significance is now beyond dispute, a focus on the sporting context will never be the 800-pound gorilla on the scholarly agenda of communication and media studies. The community of scholars, within communication and media studies, while growing, is destined to be comparatively small.

Because of this, a key to the area’s viability and expanded impact depends on the creation of a big tent that is proactively welcoming to communication and media studies scholars across the world on one hand and to scholars from key areas across sport studies on the other. On the former matter, the field is fortunate. There is good evidence that sport and its communication is growing. As a media product, the “liveness” of sport contests, has enhanced its value to legacy broadcasters and new media platforms as well. As the sport industries grow, understanding communicative contexts from marketing to organizational leadership to coaching to familial dynamics hold more value.

Still, for the area to truly succeed and grow that big tent it cannot be contained by a communication and media studies fence. For the area to succeed, its center and core in communication and media studies needs to reach across sport studies most notably to the sociology of sport and sport psychology where interest, in mediated sport in the former and in motivation and the psychology of engagement in the latter, resides. For communication and media studies scholars first approaching inquiry, engaging the sociology of sport is essential. Often scholars with interests in sport think they know a good deal about it, but much evidence suggests that they don’t know what they don’t know and what they often don’t know is much about both the sport marketplace and substantial established lines of inquiry in the sociology of sport and other areas that bear on their interests. Thus, the challenges at this nexus are two-fold. First, there is a need to cross disciplinary lines to engage with the sociology of sport and its scholarly formations. Second, there is a need to proactively invite those who share interests in communication and media in adjacent scholarly communities, in the sociology of sport, sport management, and other areas of sport studies, to their tent.

### **4.4 Contagion**

The last matter to be considered in this essay is perhaps the most important as the concept is central to the ways that “logics” about sport and mediated sport are diffused through communication to be adopted, spread, and come to be seen to have value across diverse sites in culture and the marketplace. Simply put, this last “C” that needs to be prioritized on the communication and sport scholarly agenda is contagion. At the heart of any communication inquiry is the circulation and control of meanings. The former is about process, while the latter is about power and influence.

A key idea about how mediated communication wields a quiet power is anchored in the notion of “media logic” first put forward in the late 1970s (Altheide & Snow, 1979). The notion is simple but robust. As adopted and developed more recently in theoretical development as “mediatization” (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2013; Lundby, 2009) the notion broadens how media effects are conceptualized by

focusing on how the “logics” of media have been strategically integrated into diverse institutional and organizational practices. Thus, the lens seeks to reveal how media effects may leak into virtually every crevice of the cultural fabric. This is easily seen when real life events like a sporting contest are changed to make them more media-friendly or when non-mediated events mimic the structure and values embraced in mediated articulations.

This contagion process is mirrored in theoretical development about “sportification” (Heere, 2018; Ingham, 2004). Here the focus is on how diverse non-sporting activities embrace the logic and values of sport. An easy example here is in the cultural framing of political campaigns as sporting contests replete with the use of sporting language to describe and understand political jousting. For communication scholars interested in how sport and its communication come together to have broad social and cultural influences, the conceptual marriage of mediatization and sportification processes and the following of their processes of contagion seems most promising (c.f., Frandsen, 2014). In the hyper-commodified settings of mediated sport in the particular, an understanding of core processes of “consumer sociality” seem essential (Bauman, 2007). There is much evidence that contagion from the “dirty logics” (Wenner, 2007) of the mediated sport marketplace extend to everyday communication and broadly to lived experience. For these reasons, the processes of contagion offer a promising center to communication and sport inquiry.

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