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## Communication and sport: Reflections on the trajectory and future of a disciplinary project

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# Communication and Sport: Reflections on the Trajectory and Future of a Disciplinary Project



Lawrence A. Wenner<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In this editorial essay, *Communication and Sport* Editor-in-Chief Lawrence Wenner reflects on the trajectory and role of the journal since its inception in 2012 and first publication in 2013. Considered are how the contours of *Communication and Sport* as a scholarly project were defined in important ways by an inaugural double issue in 2013 that featured key figures in the development of communication and sport as an articulated and important area of inquiry and have been given further shape by key studies, special issues and research forums published in the journal's first three years. The latter part of the essay considers the maturation and rising interest in the journal over its first four years of publication and how this drove the move, in year five, to publish six issues a year beginning in 2017.

## Keywords

sport communication, mediated sport, journal impact factors, sociology of sport, sport management

For those of you that have come to know me over the years, it is clear that I take the success of *Communication and Sport* as a scholarly project, one centered in the fields

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of communication and media studies, but with ready outreach more broadly to both the socio-cultural study of sport and sport management, very seriously and indeed, personally. As one of small group of communication scholars (along with Michael Real, Walter Gantz, Jennings Bryant, Garry Whannel, David Rowe and others) who were daring enough to play the “sports card” in communication and media studies, when the popular, and most particularly sport, was not popular, I am intimately familiar with what has been the “long struggle” for communication and sport to gain disciplinary legitimacy.

Collectively, we should not forget that legitimacy for communication and sport came first outside the fields of communication and media studies. From the 1980s on, media and sport were key topics in the conferences and journals of the International Sociology of Sport Association and the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport. And when some form of legitimacy finally came within the field of communication in the 1990s, the recognition came not from the flagship scholarly organizations centered in the United States, but by a media and sport group being formed within the International Association for Media and Communication Research, a Euro-centric but truly international academic society. It took a new millennium to bring organization articulations of communication and sport study first to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and the Broadcast Education Association and only recently to the International Communication Association and the National Communication Association.

It is encouraging that these last two scholarly organizations have finally set a place at the table for communication and sport. Yet, that they have been so slow to do so is worthy of a word of caution as the area attempts to define itself on its own terms. It seems to me essential that communication and sport, as an area of inquiry quite different than any other in communication and media studies, play a lead role in that definition, rather than by being folded into or enveloped by the received “conventional wisdom” that may remain “in the water” of these organizations that have demonstrated reticence in accepting the area’s legitimacy.

This is why, as I developed the proposal to publish *Communication and Sport* with SAGE Publishing, I recommended at launch that we publish the journal in association with the nascent International Association for Communication and Sport rather than an arm of one of the scholarly organizations that had been slow to accept the area’s legitimacy. Driven by concerns that scholarly societies in communication and media studies were not “stepping up to the plate” of communication and sport inquiry, IACS was formed in part as an organic ground level response to unmet needs in the scholarly community, seen most particularly in its initial Summits prior to organizational formation, and spoke to three interlocking needs prerequisite for the area’s success.

First, the new organization spoke to the need for communication and sport inquiry to frame itself in ways that reach beyond the traditional communication and media studies bubble. Second, the IACS formation recognized that the study of communication and sport was inherently interdisciplinary and that its development, along

both socio-cultural and professional lines of inquiry, had been much influenced by scholars seated in the sociology of sport and in sport management. Thus, IACS and *Communication and Sport* both needed to provide venues for communication and media studies scholars to transact with other scholars interested in sport who were unlikely to worship at the traditional shrines of communication organizations. Third, the formation of IACS and *Communication and Sport* (along with the Human Kinetics journal the *International Journal of Sport Communication* with its central focus related to sport management) recognizes that, in order to reach critical mass for success, that communication and sport inquiry needs to be an international as well as interdisciplinary affair. While communication and sport is a vibrant scholarly area, it is, at this point, not a large one in any quarters of the world. Given its relatively slow acceptance as an area of inquiry, most particularly in the United States, we need a global community of scholars not only to continue to demonstrate its resonance, but to interrogate the painfully obvious reality that sport is one of those cultural products that regularly crosses borders with social, political, and economic ramifications.

In this light, let me briefly reflect upon some of what *Communication and Sport* has achieved in its first years of publication and look ahead at some opportunities on down the road as the journal and the field move to maturity. At the outset, any scholarly project like this requires both leadership and committed action from what necessarily needs to be a growing community. As Editor, on the leadership front, I have been blessed to work with an unparalleled trio of scholars as Associate Editors: Andy Billings, Marie Hardin and David Rowe. Their participation has been essential on two fronts. Not only does their collective body of work showcase a high bar of what communication and sport scholarship can be, their responsive counsel as a “kitchen cabinet” on matters of strategy and priorities has provided a crucial sounding board. As well, from the outset, we have attempted to seed our editorial board with a diverse global group of leading scholars. In our first two years, we were fortunate to be able to entice key legacy scholars, such as Garry Whannel, Michael Real, Jennings Bryant, Walter Gantz, Mary Jo Kane, Margaret Carlisle Duncan and others, to “sign” their commitment to *Communication and Sport* as a project that sought to define excellence in the area of communication and sport inquiry. While we continue to rotate members off and on to our editorial board with an eye to continually diversifying and internationalizing its composition, we aim for the group and their credentials to speak to the clear intentions that *Communication and Sport* has in playing a “big league” game.

In that light, our decision to “open for business” in 2013 at *Communication and Sport* by publishing a double inaugural special issue, featuring “Reflections on Communication and Sport: Perspectives from Key Figures,” not only set the tone for the journal’s aspirations but served to “sign” the endorsement for the project by a set of scholars—not only from communication and media studies but the sociology of sport, cultural studies, and sport management—whose work has been seminal to

the area's development. Our strategy to publish articles destined to be heavily cited in our inaugural issue was intentional and successful.

In good part, the "splash" of the inaugural issue fueled key submissions from senior scholars in sport studies that served to anchor the September 2013 special issue of *Communication and Sport* on "Women and the Sports Media." Two of those articles, an important 20-year longitudinal study of the coverage of women's sports in television news (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013) and a breakthrough study of how elite female athletes interpret sexualized images in the selling of women's sports (Kane, LaVoi, & Fink, 2013) were not only the most heavily cited in our first years of publication, but by featuring the work of Michael Messner, Cheryl Cooky, Mary Jo Kane, and Janet Fink, gave scholars in the sociology of sport and sport management confidence that *Communication and Sport* would provide a welcome home for their work.

The ability of *Communication and Sport* to be nimble in response to research trends was signaled in the "Twitter Research Forum" published in the June 2014 issue. Responding to collective concern amongst the senior editorial team and the editorial board about the deluge and some of the attributes of research on the use of Twitter by sport organizations and athletes and its impact, eight leading scholars engaged with the study of social media and sport assessed weaknesses in and remedies for an emerging, and too often euphoric and easily propagated, research agenda. The dialogue that emerged considered my editorial query (Wenner, 2014) about whether there was "Much Ado (or Not) About Twitter?" Contributing scholars interrogated questions about the importance, validity, and generalizability in the emerging agenda and priorities and needs for the long term in research on social media and sport. While some in our research community may have seen the Forum as a "push back" on an important new development, others saw our interrogation as a needed sober moment about a line of inquiry of overstated importance. With hindsight, and the current faltering of Twitter in the social media economy, our concerns were well founded and not surprisingly, the articles featured in our Forum have been heavily cited in research moving forward.

The third year of *Communication and Sport* in 2015 was notable in many regards. Responding to rising submissions and a growing queue of accepted articles waiting to be published in the print edition, our annual page count allocation went up by nearly a quarter to 480 pages. The first issue of the year, a special issue on "mapping the terrain" of communication and sport scholarship, guest edited by Michael Butterworth and Jeffrey Kassing, showcased the importance of an emergent communication studies research agenda that engages "non-media" questions about interpersonal, group, organizational and rhetorical communication in and about sport. The lead article in that issue, considering research on communication, disability and sport (Cherney, Lindemann, & Hardin, 2015) continues to be amongst the most frequently accessed articles we have published.

The September 2015 issue made two very different "splashes" on the communication and sport landscape. My editorial essay (Wenner, 2015) asking "where are

thou?” about whether fissures in the epistemological playing fields seen in communication and sport inquiry were competing or complementary, happening in isolation or with needed coherence, fueled much food for thought and discussion about the terms, conditions and priorities of an emerging field. A far bigger “splash” came with the June 2015 SAGE OnlineFirst publication (in advance of the September print issue) of Cheryl Cooky, Michael Messner, and Michela Musto’s “It’s Dude Time”: A Quarter Century of Excluding Women’s Sports in Televised News and Highlight Shows” (2015). In a continuation of the longest running longitudinal research project on mediated sport, this report, sobering in many regards, shows that, with regards to the coverage of women’s sports that we haven’t “come a long way baby.” With a cohesive media push in companion with the publication of this study, orchestrated by the authors, their universities, and funding organizations in concert with SAGE Publishing, this article has recently exceeded 20,000 accesses to its online publication, an unheard of reception for few scholarly articles, let alone one published in a relatively new outlet such as *Communication and Sport*.

The trend lines for the strong reception to *Communication and Sport* continued in 2016. Increased submissions featured work from diverse quarters of communication and media studies, continued interest and participation in the project came from scholars focused on sport communication in sport management programs, and the journal, as a worthy research outlet, was attracting the eye of key scholars in the sociology of sport. In short, there was much evidence that the recipe put forward for success at inception was simmering nicely. Our biggest problem continued to be the strong interest that the journal was garnering, yielding increased and quality submissions, but with the side effect of longer wait times for accepted manuscripts to be published in the print edition, even as we continued to promptly publish accepted articles within weeks of acceptance via SAGE OnlineFirst. To alleviate this “problem of success,” I’m pleased to pass along that, beginning with this, our fifth year of publication in 2017, SAGE Publishing has committed to publishing six issues of *Communication and Sport* with a total annual page allocation of 768 pages. For a quarterly journal launched in 2012 and first published in 2013 with an annual page allotment of 400 pages, this shows that we have indeed “come a long way baby.”

There are other “encouraging signs” for *Communication and Sport* as well as it enters its fifth year. As most know, there is increasing concern on the part of academic institutions and scholarly communities about measuring the quality and impact of research publications. While there remains much debate about the merits, and indeed validity, of some of the “metrics” that are used, being measured by and being successful in terms of some standard metrics has become increasingly important to not only a journal’s reputation, but to the fate of tenure and promotion portfolios put forward by scholars in all disciplines.

Thus, since the launch of *Communication and Sport*, the publishing editors at SAGE Publishing and I have attempted to continually “take the temperature” of how things are going in terms of journal’s quality profile with an eye to assessing when might be the “right moment” to put the journal forward for consideration by

the Clarivate Analytics *Journal Citation Reports* (formerly owned by Thomson Reuters) for inclusion in impact factor assessments and ranking. *JCR* is generally considered the most systematic, objective means to evaluate the quality of research in scholarly journals. While it is an important step for a publisher to put a new journal, such as *Communication and Sport*, up for consideration, our community should know that it can be a risky proposition as to whether a new journal will be granted entry upon first submission as this is a selective process, most particularly for new journals in less established fields. Like all new journals, *Communication and Sport* wasn't eligible to be put forward until it had a track record of years of publication. However, in consultation with me, our publishing team has been running "hypotheticals" on impact factors for *Communication and Sport* in the past few years, and a recent running of these showed strong evidence for the impact of our published work.

Thus, as I write this near the close of 2016, our submission package for *JCR* consideration is moving forward. While we cannot be assured of our success with this first application, it is clear that *Communication and Sport* is on a strong trajectory. We're especially pleased for the continued support that SAGE Publishing has given to our project. Beyond their willingness to support our publication of six issues each year, they have consistently reported back to me that *Communication and Sport* has been one of their strongest U.S.-based journal launches in recent years. Given this, SAGE has recently informed me that they have put *Communication and Sport* forward for consideration for other awards for new journals as well. On this and on our fate in being considered for inclusion in *JCR*, keep up your good work and keep your fingers crossed.

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