



Towards A "Digital" Sports Journalism: Field Theory, Changing Boundaries And Evolving Technologies

By: **Gregory Perreault** and Travis R. Bell

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Abstract

Long trivialized as the “toy department,” sports journalism nevertheless represents an enduring, and vital subfield within journalism. As with many niches of journalism, sports journalism has needed to adjust to changes resulting from the technology of the field. In particular, digital sports journalism faces pressure from adjacent fields, represented in team and player media, which perform many of the same tasks historically attributed to sports journalism. Through the lens of field theory, the present study reports on long-form interviews with 47 sports journalists who self-defined their work as digital journalism. This study argues that the perception of insurgents—team media that prior research demonstrated is often seen as a part of the field—has caused digital sports journalists to view their work as economically vital to the individual newsroom, but not topically essential to the journalistic field at large.

Keywords

sports journalism, digital journalism, media sociology, interviews, field theory, team media

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As with any journalism specialty, sports journalism has been shaped by developments in technology (English, 2016). This study seeks to understand how digital sports journalists conceptualize their role individually and within the field, particularly amidst perceived new entrants in their practice through the presence of team media and enthusiast bloggers. Prior research has established that the journalistic role is persistent and influential, offering guidance and shape for how journalists undertake everyday practice from gathering sources to structuring a news piece (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). To this end, this research conducted long-form interviews with 47 digital sports journalists about their role conception, digital practices, and how they perceive sports journalism operating within the broader journalistic field. Based on this research, this study argues digital sports journalists articulate their role in a way that shows them more in line with team media than with either digital journalists (Ferrucci & Vos, 2017) or with traditional sports journalists (Reed, 2018). From a field perspective, the authors argue that team media represents a sort of insurgency in the journalistic field—agents from an adjacent field who have entered the journalistic field—but rather than being expelled, these agents are welcomed perhaps as a result of their similar role conceptions.

Literature Review

Field Theory

Field theory attempts to make sense of elements interacting within the field and how social actors make sense of those elements (Benson, 2004). The social actors play a variety of roles on the field. Dominant positions are held by incumbents—actors invested in maintaining a particular shape of a field and who may even change the rules of competition in order to maintain their position (Vos, 2019). Occasionally, fields include insurgents—new agents interested in altering the field in order to have a better ability to compete (Vos, 2019). In contrast, prior research has found mobile journalists and bloggers operating as insurgents in the field, normalizing practices such as the inclusion of lifestyle journalism elements—such as audience interaction (Perreault & Stanfield, 2019).

In Bourdieu's (1998) framework, four elements compose field theory: field, doxa, habitus, and capital. In many fields, incumbents fight for the "transformation or preservation" of their space (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 40–41), and journalism is no different, with digital practices often viewed with a skeptical eye (Tandoc & Foo, 2018). These different elements of a field offer often competing interests that pull on the individual journalists as they attempt to enact their professional role. English (2017) places sport near the center of the journalistic field, pulled slightly more by economic capital than by journalistic capital and by the total capital of general news than the lower capital (e.g., specialized blogs). Yet other fields also pull on sport, such as strategic communication, and as a result of factors such as socialization and training, team media writers who would initially seem to be part of the strategic

communications field are at times perceived as a part of the journalistic field (Mirer, 2019). The other reason they seem to fit is their ability to articulate a *doxa* that fits within the journalistic field.

Journalists actively exhibit their field's *doxa*, which are the values and ethics of their professional practice (Vos et al., 2012), in various ways. As professionals proceed in any field, they apply predisposed expectations within their field—*habitus*. *Habitus* is defined as an “understanding of the journalistic game” (Tandoc, 2014, p. 562). In sports journalism, this would be reflected in the use of the hero's myth in order to “craft narratives about elite athletes and coaches” (Reed, 2019, p. 245).

Journalistic capital or “what is valued most in the journalistic field” (Maeres & Hanusch, 2020, p. 15) remains in flux discursively. In Bourdieu's model, there are three forms to capital: cultural—the level of respect given because of titles or awards in the field; social—the total of one's social involvement (Siapera & Spyridou, 2012); and economic—the financial value attributed to professionals. English (2017) notes that “the pursuit of economic capital dominates the sports journalism field” (p. 1009). This isn't surprising, given that Bourdieu (1986) indicates that economic capital perhaps has the strongest pull within the field. In mapping sports journalism within the field, Bourdieu (1998) only mentioned sports journalists once in his work, but that reference identified sports journalism as a form of service in the sports industry.

Changes in technology and economic funding (Tandoc, 2014) have allowed fields that are adjacent to sports journalism to conduct similar work—namely unpaid sports enthusiasts/bloggers and team media for sports organizations. Yet the influence of these forces doesn't mean that shared understandings of news practice don't exist or that journalists have given up their authority to their audience (Hutchins & Boyle, 2017)

The perception of insurgents (e.g., bloggers, team media) has certainly forced sports journalists to deploy boundaries to secure their professional identity. As Mirer (2019) argues, sports journalists deploy boundaries of their *doxa*—in articulation of professional ethics. These journalists argue their work reflects “adhering to standards of truth and maintaining a personal independence” (Mirer, 2019, p. 9). Yet most professional sports organizations now employ journalists to produce team news, as a result of financial troubles in the news industry, and make similar ethical claims (Kian & Zimmerman, 2012; Yanity, 2013). Journalists who work for sports organizations often reject the perception that they have left the journalistic field—noting their adherence to journalistic norms, despite working actively for a particular sports organization. This tension between team media and sports journalism displays a degree of instability within sports journalism that has existed much longer (Mirer, 2019).

Role Conception of Sports Journalism

Professional roles represent the individual enactment of the *habitus* as a “predetermined set of discourses and actions appropriate to a particular ‘stage-part’”

(Bourdieu, 1977, p. 2). Numerous role tensions exist within journalism, in particular between the roles of scrutinizing watchdog and advocate for specific people and causes (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). This tension is reflected in mobile (Perreault & Stanfield, 2019), political (Perreault et al., 2019) and gaming (Perreault & Vos, 2020) journalism, but is perhaps more acutely reflected in the context of sports journalists who have been questioned for confusing roles of enthusiast and journalist (Boyle, 2006).

This study builds on the role conception offered by Hanitzsch and Vos (2018). We must note that (1) the Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) construction of role conception leans on important work that preceded it (see Cohen, 1963; Janowitz, 1975; Weaver et al., 1986, 2009; Weaver & Willnat, 2012; Willnat & Weaver, 2014), hence, the authors' contention is that (2) role conceptions are discursive constructions, as Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) argue, and (3) role conception needs a conceptual divorce from a Western-centrist perspective in order to avoid being limited by this perspective. This is in contrast to prior work on role conception in sport (see Reed, 2018, for example) that built on Weaver et al.'s (1986) role conception scholarship. Worth noting is that in Reed's (2018) study, sports journalists were largely found to identify with the adversarial role.

Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) identify a number of roles operating internationally, that have greater or lesser emphasis depending on country and specialty. Persistent in American journalism are the monitorial, storyteller, educational, and, particularly in digital journalism, advocacy role (Ferrucci & Vos, 2017).¹ In order to successfully place digital sports journalists within the field, we will briefly introduce each of the roles as presented in Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) and how journalists conceptualize the roles:

- The watchdog role is perhaps the role most associated with the journalism field. This role is an active approach to pursuing truth. Journalists who embrace this role proactively scrutinize leadership and provide an independent critique of society (McQuail, 2000).
- The monitorial role is not an active pursuer, as journalists respond as they become aware (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018).
- The storyteller role offers perspective through historical and explanatory context often lost in a digitally, immediate news cycle (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018).
- The educator role reflects the journalistic function of teacher (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). When acting as educators, journalists aim to raise public awareness about a problem.
- The advocacy role is more accepted in digital journalism than in legacy media (Ferrucci & Vos, 2017), and it reflects the journalist as a spokesperson for specific groups and as a lobbyist for particular causes (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018).

- The disseminator role is closely associated with the function of information distribution (Weaver et al., 1986) whereas journalists see themselves as neutral bystanders (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018).
- The curator role repackages the most relevant information gathered on a certain topic.
- The analyzer role allows journalistic subjectivity by tracing causes and predicting results (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018).
- The access provider role empowers audience participation with a platform and a forum to express their perspective.
- The mobilizer role emphasizes political involvement by proactively encouraging audience participation in politics (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018).
- The detective role defines investigative practices employed to scrutinize governmental statements and gather information journalists find suspicious.
- The missionary role promotes particular values and ideologies—motivated not on the behalf of others but by the journalist’s own personal ideology (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018).
- The change agent advocates for social change and reform, largely in transitional and developing societies.
- The mediator role intends to promote social integration and reduce social tension.
- The facilitator role encourages journalists to feel it is their responsibility to assist the government in advancing the development of the country.
- The collaborator role advances the facilitator concept where journalists see themselves as public communicators in support of governmental policies (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018).
- The mouthpiece role—similar to the disseminator role—occurs when journalists draw on official information to explain and legitimate political decisions to the people.
- Finally, the adversary role postures journalists as a counter force to political power and as a voice of the people, a role which Reed (2018) found sports journalists most strongly embrace.

Sports journalists have been criticized for “cheering for the home team” (Garrison & Salwen, 1989, p. 57) and yet, Hardin (2005) found that 39% of U.S. editors believe their sports journalists should cheer for home teams in their reporting. While the individual story might avoid a biased perspective, journalists nevertheless often privileged their home team in the selection of stories (English, 2017). Paradoxically situated as less important news information relegated to the back page (Boyle, 2017) to the most-watched events in all of television (e.g., World Cup, Super Bowl), the sports/media complex is just as it sounds, a complex relationship between two juggernaut industries that need each other, yet can marginalize one another at the same time (Jhally, 1984). These journalists and practitioners allow audiences to connect to

the most significant information through their ability to cultivate relationships with sources and craft stories of local, regional, or national import (Genovese, 2015).

Yet, the 21st century has seen a decreasing role of journalists' doxa in sports coverage, with the shifting and segmented market share affecting individual and economic capital, and a slight influx of gender disparity (except in the broadcast booth habitus). Complex topics such as brain injuries, sexuality, and nationality thrust sports journalists into an issue-laden workplace well beyond reporting wins and losses (Bell et al., 2019; Messner, 2013). Furthermore, the decrease in number of sports journalists, condensing of media ownership, and influx of topics has constructed a form of pack journalism that could adversely impact "the tone and tenor of the journalism" (Boyle, 2017, p. 493) as it becomes restricted by specific corporate parameters. All of this together reflects the challenges confronting sports journalists (English, 2012). Related to field instability, the growth of team media has exacerbated the tension within sports journalism. In-house sports reporters often argue they "represent the fan in the locker room" (Mirer, 2019, p. 9), a claim not overly divorced from the *advocate* role in journalism. Mirer (2019) argues that team media replicates many of the same functions of the independent sports journalist, but they "serve their audiences only in their capacity as fans, not as members of community beyond the team" (p. 9). Thus, a feature holding the sports journalism field apart from in-house sports media is the responsibility to the audience to report within the context of the community.

While certainly digital journalism is increasingly essential to the journalistic field, it is worth considering that a "digital sports journalism" may be distinctive from sports journalism. Eldridge and Franklin (2016) argue digital journalists at times employ role conceptions that differ from non-digital journalists.

Digital Journalism Practices in Sport

Sports journalists are under pressure following "changes in mobile and digital media technologies, journalistic routines, and institutional relations" (Hutchins & Boyle, 2017, p. 1). Hutchins and Boyle (2017) suggest that journalists must consider the presentation of their work in order to avoid being obsolesced by the growing popularity of mobile devices in news consumption. Legacy media journalists have responded by adopting the practices and roles of digital journalism, normalizing them within the field (Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020). Indeed, "there is no such thing as 'digital journalism' anymore to actors within the field; it is simply journalism" (Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020, p. 26).

Where information is accessed and who provides it has presented a seismic alteration to the practice and professional standards of sports journalism (Boyle, 2017). Digital journalists embody expectations of ideological and digital forms of journalistic practices while grappling with how to sustain an entire industry (Zelizer, 2019); this has resulted in a level of co-dependency between journalists and social media that dictates news stories and media hype in a cyclical relationship often guided by public interests and their desire to interact (Roese, 2018). For this study, digital is not just technologies

to perform journalism but conceptualizations of the “new opportunities to . . . engage with multiple publics, and to tell multi-sided stories” (Waisbord, 2019, p. 357).

Based on this research, this study seeks to understand how digital sports journalists articulate their role in relation to (1) new entrants in the field and (2) to their legacy media counterparts. This leads us to the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do digital sports journalists discursively construct their role as it relates to adjacent fields?

RQ 2: How do digital sports journalists conceptualize their practice within the journalistic field?

Methods

Researchers identified 306 journalists who cover sports with a primary digital orientation from across the United States and contacted them between January 2019 to April 2019. For the purposes of recruitment, researchers defined journalists as those who work primarily for a journalistic outlet, perform journalistic duties, and report on timely, relevant topics (Fröhlich et al., 2013). Initial proposed participants were identified via a purposeful sampling method (Koerber & McMichael, 2008) as journalists whose qualifications included coverage of sports as their sole specialty, digital publication focus, or work for a news organization (as opposed to team media). Furthermore, researchers aimed to include journalists from a variety of mediums and with a range of audiences (e.g., local and national, niche and general). To qualify for the study, participants were asked if they self-identified as a “digital journalist” without having a definition provided. This was done to reflect that “digital journalism” represents a tension between both the “digital” and the “journalism” as well as between “change” and “continuity” (Eldridge et al., 2019). Thus, the final sample of journalists, who both responded to the research invitation and met the qualifications, provide a combination of those worked for strictly digital outlets (e.g., *Rivals*, *24/7 Sports Podcast*, *Right Games*) as well as traditional outlets (e.g., *ESPN the Magazine*, *Tampa Bay Times*, *Sports Illustrated*). Participants were recruited via email and contacted on the phone after IRB approval. This resulted in 47 interviews with journalists who responded and self-identified as both a sports journalist and a digital journalist.

All of the participants were located in the United States. Thirty-nine of the participants defined their gender as “male,” five identified as “female,” and three did not self-identify. This gender breakdown is heavily skewed male, but also is representative of larger trends and concerns about the sports journalism niche (Boyle, 2006; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009). The participants were asked to describe their journalistic medium. The sample included 24 “print and digital newspaper/local,” eight “digital only,” eight “print and digital magazine/national,” four “radio,” and three “television.” The vast majority identified their ethnicity as “white”

($n = 40$), three identified as “African-American,” two identified as “Asian,” and two declined to answer. Perhaps due to the digital requirement of the respondent, the average amount of experience was 7 years in the journalism industry.

Interviews were conducted until the researchers reached saturation of responses. Researchers then transcribed the interviews for textual analysis. In order to arrive at themes that addressed the research questions, the authors analyzed the data using a constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). This approach is often associated with grounded theory, but as Fram (2013) argues, constant comparative analysis assists both etic coding, driven by theory and literature, and emic coding, driven by themes that emerge from data analysis. During this open coding, any allusion to the journalistic field, journalistic role performance, and journalistic practice were considered. After each response was coded, themes and thoughts emerging from the coded interviews were compared to establish resonance and find associations, unities, and differences among them. All participants were granted anonymity in part because this study is most interested in understanding perspectives on sports journalism that are held within the field. Responses are reported by a participant number to respect anonymity.

Interview Questionnaire

The interviews probed the journalists’ experience with sports journalism and their journalistic roles, asking journalists to describe the priorities in their reporting. Given that the current research examines journalistic roles in the sports journalism subfield in the United States, researchers phrased questions to allow for specific, detailed expansive answers. For example, “what does the term ‘sports journalism’ mean to you?” and “how is digital journalism done in your newsroom?” Scale role conception questions from the Worlds of Journalism survey (see Hanitzsch et al., 2020) were used to provide a sense of context, and those measurements and role definitions are listed in the section that follows. The interviews were structured and lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour in length. The structured format was selected in order to keep the interview focused on the target topic and in order to allow interviews to be comparable among interview subjects (Bryman, 2008). Questions were divided into five areas: (1) journalists’ professional background and current occupational context, (2) journalists’ priorities regarding their journalistic roles (Hanitzsch et al., 2020), (3) most important roles as sports journalists, (4) potential sources of influence on their work, and (5) how they define and think about the practice of digital journalism.

Based on roles identified in Hanitzsch and Vos (2018), all prompts included the preamble “On a Likert scale (1 = *Unimportant* to 5 = *Extremely important*), how important do you perceive these roles to be in your work.” The roles with strongest responses were measured. For each of the roles most strongly evidenced in the qualitative data, the scale role results—and how it measured—are included in order to demonstrate the degree to which the perspective on these roles was shared by

Table 1. Role Conception Values for Digital Sports Journalists.

Role	Mean	Standard Deviation
Monitorial	4.27	0.89
Storyteller	4.07	1.11
Educator	3.81	0.79
Watchdog	3.21	1.49
Advocate	2.75	1.23

interview subjects. Relative to the strongest five values reported by participants (see Table 1), the following roles were assessed in the manner described below.

In the questionnaire, the watchdog role was examined by scale values for “Monitor and scrutinize political leaders” and “Monitor and scrutinize business leaders.” The monitorial role was examined by the scale values for “Be a detached observer” and “Report things as they are.”

The storyteller role was examined by scale values for “Tell stories about the world” and “Provide entertainment and relaxation.” The educator role was examined through the scale statements “Educate the audience” and “Provide an analysis of current affairs.” The advocate role examined through the scale statements “Influence public opinion” and “Advocate for social change.”

Findings and Discussion

Sports Journalism Role Conception and the Enrichment Role

To answer the first research question, digital sports journalists most strongly identified with the monitorial role. This is a standard role in American sports journalism and helped cement even their “new” digital² content from unpaid, enthusiast content but failed to adequately jettison in-house sports reporters from the fold. This perhaps in part reflects the other top roles articulated by respondents—the storyteller and educator roles—which certainly appear in adjacent fields.

The monitorial role ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.89$) allowed them to reflect an understanding of journalists as critical observers of political/business conduct. In articulating this role, journalists argued their role was to “report the most pressing and important news with accuracy, fairness, and timeliness” (Participant 45). Digital sports journalists alluded to their journalistic process that requires accurate field notes and balanced storytelling (Participant 5). This requires journalists to act with personal “integrity” (Participant 19). Journalists note this does not relegate them to simply acting as a stenographer. Reporting “a play-by-play” is only a part of a journalist’s job (Participant 7). In reflecting this role, the digital sports journalists are not the “voice of the fan” (Participant 25) and need to “remain unbiased” (Participant 34) in acting as “custodian of the public trust” (Participant 25).

In the storyteller role ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.11$) the digital sports journalist generates space “to give a voice to people who are traditionally ignored” (Participant 15) and moves beyond the box score (Participant 21) for stories about everyone involved in sport (Participant 6). This perspective allows journalists to tell the “human interest stories no one else is telling” (Participant 1) often with the “digital audience” in mind (Participant 22). This role can be fun but also should consider ancillary topics (e.g., racial justice) while remaining rooted in sport. A journalist can reflect on these adjacent stories and “how they’re having a bigger impact on the community as a whole and . . . impacting [their] audience” (Participant 2). The storyteller role produces “people’s dessert,” and if they provide a “satisfying dessert, then people will be happy” (Participant 20). Sports is a “metaphor for everything in life” (Participant 16) and leads these journalists to remarkable storytelling opportunities.

The educator role skews slightly lower qualitatively and quantitatively ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.79$) and serves often as parallel and supportive of the storyteller and monitorial roles. Digital journalism then should “educate the fans, to answer any questions that the public may have about teams, and to entertain people” (Participant 32). Similarly, Participant 36 argued that “it’s our job to entertain and educate the people. We have to understand their emotions.” This comes from journalists building “trust” (Participant 13) and getting “behind the scenes” (Participant 9). Participants argue that ideally the journalists—like teachers of challenging subject areas—should take seemingly complex stories in the sports world and make it digestible and understandable to teach those unfamiliar with the sport (Participants 1, 12, 41).

The watchdog ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.49$) role received less quantitative emphasis but was articulated strongly as a qualitative journalistic value that requires a “critical thinker/investigator” (Participant 40) who must do important, hard work (Participants 9, 13). The advocate role ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.23$) went nearly unmentioned throughout the responses, despite its strong appreciation in prior research. Participants largely did not conceive of their digital sports reporting as essential to the journalism field, yet nevertheless recognized their subfield as centrally located within the broader field (English, 2017).

Two roles (mouthpiece and mobilizer) emerge from participant responses as unique within digital sports journalism. This aligns with the rise of eSports as a space to “evangelize esports” (Participant 5) because the audience and even newsroom leaders lack understanding about the magnitude of this billion-dollar industry. Thus, the journalist is “filling that void” (Participant 13). The mobilizer role engages emergent fields that requires “determination to get through the rough patches” (Participant 13), especially for recognition of value within the journalistic field. These new fields within digital sports journalism that require mobilization and traction include eSports and gambling largely because of their economic potential.

A new role conception develops from participant responses as well. The *enrichment* role “accentuates coverage” (Participant 29) for the audience. It still reflects the journalistic process because “reporting still matters” (Participant 19) but it requires deep digging to find the “stories behind the stories” (Participant 14). This

enriching process produces the “insider” information for the audience but is also a satisfying achievement for the digital sports journalist “to reflect how they’re having a bigger impact on the community as a whole” (Participant 2). Thus, in this role, the digital sports journalist can “enrich the community overall” (Participant 36) but reach beyond the community boundaries once restricted in the journalistic field. This role bears similarities to the analyzer, detective, and missionary roles, given the description above, but the authors postulate the role presented through “enrichment” is a synthesized role perhaps unique to digital sports journalism.

Digital sports journalists see their work as vital within the news organization (Participant 7) because of the breadth (e.g., crime, economics, health) of covering a sports beat (Participant 34). This demonstrates the tension of being both sports and digital journalists, because digital sports journalists are “journalist[s] first” who “happens to cover sports” (Participant 19). This reflects a perception of the dominating effect of the “pursuit of economic capital” (English, 2017, p. 1009) through sports journalism more broadly, and by their digital journalism specifically.

This finding presents an obvious discrepancy. The digital sports journalist feels crucial to the news organization but not indispensable to the journalistic field. This acknowledges that some of this work is done by in-house reporters (Mirer, 2019) and by unpaid, enthusiast bloggers (McEnnis, 2017), even if it not in the exact journalistic way. Certainly, these journalists articulate their roles as to emphasize journalistic doxa demonstrating their rootedness in the journalistic field. This was perhaps a way to demarcate how their work differs from team media, which may be doing work much like their own.

Notably absent in the responses was a reflection on what specifically differentiates digital journalism from the pre-digital journalism of their colleagues. In the roles they outlined, these journalists showed more similarities with the broadsheet sports journalists of English (2017) than with the digital journalists of Ferrucci and Vos (2017). The values of advocacy journalism were reflected in few of the qualitative responses. Since most of these digital journalists saw themselves as “digital journalists” who happened to work at local newspapers, this perhaps speaks to the emphasis on commercialism in sports journalism in particular (Bourdieu, 1986) and to its reflection in the economic capital of the subfield (English, 2017). In other words, they had a responsibility, not just to their audience, but also to their newsroom.

Digital Practice in Sports Journalism

To answer the second research question, sports journalists overwhelmingly conceptualize the practice of digital journalism as paramount—perhaps more important than journalistic ideals about their work. However, a lack of consensus appeared in articulating how to perform the practice, which participants connected with traditional journalistic role qualities identified in the first research question. For example,

Participant 7 noted that the “hallmark” of digital journalism is pursuing the truth and providing accurate information—clearly building on the monitorial role.

It is important to recognize change as a central theme in digital practice, as digital sports journalists explained adaptability (Participant 21) and openness to a shifting media landscape (Participant 12) as being essential to their practices. That comes through adapting to providing information and connecting with sources in new ways (Participant 13). This also forces journalists to become knowledgeable about new outlets and audiences, especially in eSports (Participant 12). Thus, the practice balances educating self and others in the evolving space of production and consumption, but also grappling with a tension between tradition and turbulence of change (English, 2017; Hutchins & Boyle, 2017).

The application of digital practice appears primarily in two ways: story formation and distribution. The job requires “digitally savvy” (Participant 19) techniques, which is the biggest shift in the digital practice of sports journalism (Roese, 2018). The impact of sport organizations generating and controlling access to content was noted as an additional hindrance because of a battle for unique, digitally-produced content (Sherwood et al., 2017). This is exacerbated through the development of in-house reporting organizations that would—naturally—receive preferential access (Mirer, 2019).

Regarding distribution, digital practice for sports journalists encompasses a blend of online for long-form stories and social platforms for instant content creation. Whereas a traditional sports journalist, especially a beat writer, might have relegated small bits of information to weekly “news and notes” sections during the height of newspapers, that information has been transformed into individual news stories in digital journalism. These nuanced, quick-hitting facts feed the “instant world of news consumption” (Participant 21) in which sports journalists circulate daily. Whether short video clips, infographics, or transaction notes, capitalizing on all sensory forms is “because news engagement in a traditional sense is getting smaller” (Participant 34). While the places to get information amplify beyond somewhat unimaginable modes 5–10 years prior, the duration of engagement focuses on “easily digestible” (Participant 21) forms of content that continue to shift toward mobile platforms.

Digital sports journalists recognize the dying nature of the physical newspaper (Participants 12, 43). The interpretive struggle for participants was how long digital work supplements and when it supplants legacy media (Participants 35, 41, 46). Digital is the new (maybe last) frontier of journalism where one must “have things online or we’re just hastening our demise” (Participant 21). In some cases, the “paper is an afterthought” (Participant 14) seen through decreases in printing production (Participants 3, 27) that forces acceptance of a “digital first” approach (Participant 26). These changes require adaptation and proficiency where it is “easy to fall behind” (Participant 15) and creates in some cases a digital divide for employees and older audiences (Participants 14, 18).

A consensus was that finding the ideal practices for digital platforms is necessary for survival and monetizing (Participant 14), reflecting the pull of economic capital from English (2017), but also the nature of digital journalism (Zelizer, 2019). As in Boyle (2017), digital sports journalists still believe that digital journalism content and practices must adhere to traditional standards of practice. Regardless, flexibility is paramount since “the world is changing, and without adapting you’re going to die. My job wouldn’t exist 10 years ago. You have to have a presence to adapt and meet people where they are” (Participant 20). The search for a digital benchmark or standard of expectation remains, which varies based on journalistic roles and target audience, with football and eSports as interesting bookends entrenched in a traditional vs. technical revolution.

Conclusion

This study argues that digital sports journalists most strongly identified with the monitorial role and—to lesser degree—with the storyteller and educator roles—roles that put them more in line with the roles practiced by team media compared to those of digital journalists (Ferrucci & Vos, 2017) or with traditional sports journalists (Reed, 2018). The novel enrichment role, a synthesized role which articulates a singular approach drawn from the analyzer, detective, and missionary roles, accentuates coverage through the production of in-depth insider information, and similarly represents a transferable role that could be as easily practiced in team media. Through 47 long-form interviews, we saw that practicing digital sports journalism means accepting the liquidity of digital journalism and that team media operates as a sort of insurgency, but rather than being expelled, these actors are generally welcomed in the journalistic field.

These digital sports journalists articulated a habitus rooted in the same norms and practices their pre-digital, legacy media counterparts would have expected. What changed was the product—reflecting the pull of economic capital and perception of participants. Thus, the digital product impacted the delivery mechanism as well as the nature of how journalists build cultural capital. As Bourdieu (1998) noted—and digital sports journalists perceived—they were part of the sports service industry. The role conception articulated here shows them as more in line with team media (Mirer, 2019) than with digital journalists (Ferrucci & Vos, 2017). Digital sports journalists articulated their doxa in ways that connected them to the journalistic field—as expected by their newsrooms—but they seemed to fit less within those norms and were more aligned with the norms of writers for professional sports teams.

Collectively, a degree of tension emerges for these digital sports journalists regarding the concept of insurgents on the journalistic field. These journalists may have perceived themselves as the insurgents—presenting digital practices through their reporting to meet the changing expectations required for both cultural capital and economic capital. However, we would argue that the insurgents on the field are

actually represented by team media reporting teams and unpaid, enthusiast bloggers. In the role conception of the field, journalists often articulate their roles as an opportunity to expel others from the boundaries of the field (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018) and the digital sports journalists here did not delineate such boundaries. As Mirer (2019) demonstrates, team media have even been considered for journalistic awards—a peak presentation of journalistic cultural capital. From the perspective of the digital sports journalist then, such insurgents have been invited into the field, thus requiring digital sports journalists to redefine what makes them essential. The journalists interviewed could not offer that definition, but the authors would argue that they are the essential “economic muscle” (Waisbord, 2019, p. 353) of news organizations and produce interest in both cultural and economic capital without sacrificing the essential components of “independence” from the journalistic doxa (Hardin, 2005). So, while it may seem as though team media might operate from a different field, digital sports journalists see them operating not only on the same topic but within the same field.

The capital in this journalistic field develops from digital practices that do not completely align with the journalistic doxa essential to the field. Thus, the digital journalist covering sports from a news organization is less of a threat to field stability than the insurgent in-house reporter or enthusiast blogger. One theoretical implication of this study is the degree to which adjacent fields can shape and empower insurgents in a niche journalistic field. The roles articulated by digital sports journalists facilitated this insurgency given that the monitorial, storyteller, educator, and the enrichment roles could fit within the scope of expectations of team media; whereas, roles such as watchdog and advocate would be more difficult to enact.

Digital practices in sports journalism alter role definitions and distribution processes, where the journalist occupies more of a moderating than mediating role. The journalist once was a mediating force between audience and the sport participant (e.g., coach, player) as the public’s first source of information. Now most interested parties have access to a consensus of information offered through social and online platforms, so the journalist role has shifted to a moderating capacity. The journalist operates with the time and capacity to aggregate pertinent information for a given story. Thus, they preside as a moderator between source and audience to engage all available storylines, with the understanding that those stories can quickly adjust much like the digital and sports journalism fields they occupy.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

It is worth noting that this paper is limited by the nature of its sample. Despite researchers attempts for a diverse sample, the participants in this study were predominantly male. However, this reflects not only the current status of the sports journalism subfield (Boyle, 2006), but also a disparity which sports journalism is making conscious efforts to correct. Therefore, while the researchers believe that the perspectives represented here may certainly represent the persistent and dominant

voices in digital sports journalism, it is possible that they do not represent all voices in digital sports journalism. Furthermore, and as a piece of primarily qualitative research, this is a study which would be difficult to replicate, in that the researchers are considered an essential component to the research practice. That said, the research team did come to both consensus and agreement on the findings of the study.

The quantitative values presented in this study could reflect the Worlds of Journalism survey's wording—reflected in the interview questionnaire applied in this study—related to “political” and “business” leaders. While certainly the head of a professional sports organization is a business leader, it could be that an adjustment in wording may have led to a higher quantitative value. In addition, the structured nature of the interviews conducted here could have limited the “richness and . . . availability of in-depth data” (Alsaawi, 2014, p. 151) in comparison to semi-structured or unstructured interviews. It could be that participant responses from a less structured interview may have shaped our study in a different direction.

Digital practices represent a divisive, yet definitive, point in a power struggle centered on control of information. This access to potential control is offered through an abundance of available digital platforms. Additionally, the field has insurgent competition from within the journalistic profession and externally through player and team media. Whereas the practice of journalism was once a barrier to entry into the discourse of sport, the development in adjacent fields and the pressure from those fields has lowered this barrier. The future of sports journalism is up for grabs, but it is a future increasingly defined by digital values.

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Notes

1. These roles are reflected in the interview questionnaire for this study and their quantitative measures can be found in the methodology.
2. Although as noted by Zelizer (2019) neither the practice nor the ideals of digital journalism are entirely new—digital journalism is built off of tried-and-true journalistic infrastructure.

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