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The Rise of the "Gatecrashers": The Growing Impact of Athletes Breaking News on Mainstream Media through Social Media

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The Rise of the “Gatecrashers”

The Growing Impact of Athletes Breaking News on Mainstream Media through Social Media

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
PREFACE.....	1
INTRODUCTION	2
LITERATURE REVIEW	10
Gatekeeping Theory.....	10
Evolution of Sports Coverage.....	17
Arrival of SportsCenter.....	20
Athletes and Social Media	25
Evolution of Gatecrashing	32
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	35
METHOD	36
Data Analysis	36
Data Collection	38
Lead Stories	39
Breaking News.....	40
Supportive	40
Self-promotion	40
RESULTS.....	42
Lead Stories	43
Breaking news category	45
Supportive category	46
Self-promotion	48
Discussion.....	49
Future Implications.....	59
Anecdotal carryover.....	63
Study Limitations.....	65
Discussions for Future Research.....	66
Conclusion	67
REFERENCES	68

ABSTRACT

This study provided a detailed examination into how gatekeeping theory is losing its traditional impact due to the increased opportunities social media has afforded the modern athlete. For the purposes of this research, those athletes who communicate through social media were able to circumvent traditional mainstream media (MSM) to broadcast their own messaging and as a result, the exclusivity of their respective content is frequently relevant to contemporary news organizations. The research explored how the MSM uses the content it airs from these athletes. An important distinction and goal of this study was to determine whether this messaging used by the MSM serves to break news or just support stories they were already planning to broadcast. This research concluded it accomplished both.

Using thematic analysis, this study coded six weeks of ESPN's *SportsCenter*, the longest running daily sportscast in American history (Fang, 2014). The research evaluated 30 hours of programming and found the athletes' impact was profound. *SportsCenter* aired a story which originated from a social media post 27 of the 30 days which often resulted in stories deemed the most meaningful in the show's daily rundown. Nearly one third of the shows led with a story that originated from the athletes' messaging while more than a third of the *SportsCenter* episodes researched aired content which was categorized as breaking news. The research illustrated the heightened trend of how these stories impacted traditional gatekeepers in terms of the premium by which the messages were received and ultimately broadcast.

This study characterized those athletes who provided traditional gatekeeping MSM platforms with meaningful content as gatecrashers. The research specifically illustrated how their content routinely resulted in the biggest stories on *SportsCenter*.

The results define a gatecrasher by showing the content which exploited the depth of how their impact has evolved. This study provided context on the evolution of the athlete on social media, including how it started, matured and escalated. The findings revealed the importance of that process in an increasingly relevant role of the gatecrasher.

PREFACE

The motivation for this research stemmed from my background as a veteran broadcast journalist. My professional career has spanned over three decades at the local, regional, and national levels working for a multitude of sports networks and professional teams as both a sports anchor and reporter. During this time, my industry has undergone radical changes beginning with how stories are produced. From using a typewriter, then graduating to a desktop computer and ultimately traveling around the country with a laptop, the changes in technology have led to easier means by which journalists can do their jobs in terms of speed and proficiency, but simultaneously have altered the relationships with the sports personalities the media covers.

During my career, it's been a priority to get to know athletes and coaches away from crowded locker rooms and often impersonal press conferences. Gaining quality access was challenging yet highly rewarding whether it was uncovering breaking news or producing a story which provided exclusive content, but the dynamic has changed with the advent of social media. From my perspective, the modern athlete decreasingly needs the media to get their messaging out because they can do it themselves and with online platforms so interactive, often it has made today's sports stars more guarded and thus tougher to form a working relationship with. At the same time, a notable trend has been watching several sports media outlets at every level increasingly lean on the athletes' messaging instead of finding ways to obtain content in person. The research in this study aimed to discover the depths of how this aspect of the modern media relationship between journalists and professional athletes has transformed the gatekeeping process and as a result launched the growth of the gatecrashers.

INTRODUCTION

On February 21, 2020 *SportsCenter* anchor Kevin Negandhi was conducting an interview with the network's NFL Insider Dan Graziano concerning the league's pending collective bargaining agreement. Negandhi introduced Graziano and then asked, "Dan when you go on Twitter you see a lot of former players and some current players voicing." Graziano then interrupted saying, "Don't go on Twitter Kevin." Kevin Negandhi's response illustrates the impact of social media on *SportsCenter*. "yeah yeah," Negandhi told Graziano, "sometimes don't go on but you can't ignore them" (ESPN, 2020, February 21).

Negandhi was right, in regards to social media posts from athletes and other figures reveal their growing influence is present seemingly on a daily basis when it comes to the content on *SportsCenter*.

The evolution of the athlete taking control of their respective messaging coincided with the arrival of social media. Twitter was launched in 2006 where athletes primarily used it for two purposes, to interact with fans and take advantage of their many avenues for self-promotion (Pegoraro, 2010). Traditionally, fans' only interaction with their favorite sports stars was getting an autograph or a picture but social media provided a closer connection. Fans saw interacting online with athletes added a whole new level to this parasocial relationship (Hambrick et al, 2010). As a result, the media's relationship changed with it, as the evolution of the athlete on social media saw them increasingly speaking their minds more on their online accounts than behind a microphone or on a tape recorder (Gregory, 2009).

As athletes tweeted more and talked less, journalists had to adapt to their new role of practicing more following than leading when it came to the news gathering process (Cooke, 2010). The role reversal sparked a new trend of airing the athletes' social media posts instead of breaking news with their own individual exclusive interviews. Research has shown younger journalists adapted faster than their sometimes technologically challenged older counterparts (Schultz and Sheffer, 2010). Journalists of all ages began to understand how to use these new platforms to their advantage by developing their own following on social media where they could break news, promote their work with their peers and fans while further connecting to their desired target audiences (Schultz and Sheffer, 2010).

Basketball Hall of Famer Shaquille O'Neal is one of several athletes who have grown into the role of social media influencers as seen in his Twitter account which boasts 15 million followers. O'Neal may have played the prime of his basketball career before the launch of social media but quickly learned how to adeptly play the role of an effective influencer at the end of his playing days and beyond. O'Neal's comments to *Sports Illustrated* in 2009 perfectly describe the crux of this research study, which focuses on how the role of traditional gatekeepers have changed due to the evolving mindset of many modern-day athletes who have taken over their respective platforms in the social media era. "In this world we live in now, everybody becomes media," O'Neal said. "If something is going to be said, hey, it's coming from me, it's coming from my phone," (as cited in Gregory, 2009).

O'Neal's comments were prophetic, as it came a year before Instagram was launched and at a time when athletes were just beginning to realize all of the options social media had to offer. The basketball star's mindset would quickly become the thought process of fellow athletes in a

variety of sports who rapidly were learning how influential an athletes' platform potential could be (Greenberg, 2009).

This trend also has become commonplace in terms of the gatekeepers gathering media reaction from politicians around the world. After the attacks on Capitol Hill in January of 2021, *NBC Nightly News* didn't talk to any world leaders on-camera as seen in its live report with Chief Foreign Correspondent Richard Engel, who instead of throwing to any pre-recorded interviews, quoted a number of tweets from world leaders from the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden and the secretary general of NATO. Engel wrapped up his live report by saying "A spokesman for the president of South Africa simply tweeted, pray for America" (Engle, 2021). This isn't an anomaly, it's a growing trend as social media posts are increasingly superseding traditional press conferences and one on one interviews in today's media climate.

No world leader has maximized the role of being a taking control of their social media platform to the degree of former President Donald Trump. His tweets were instrumental in getting his messaging out during his election and were amplified while he was president. A New York Times study analyzed over 11,000 Trump tweets during his first three years in office, where the results showed the majority were either attacking someone or promoting what he was doing on a daily basis (Larnard, 2020). The Times findings concluded Trump targeted his social media attacks on many fronts where he criticized Democrats (2,405 times), various investigations into his administration (2,065 times) and news organizations (2,065 times). His critical social media posts saw him label the mainstream media "the enemy of the people" in 36 different tweets for this study (Larnard, 2020).

Often labeling the MSM "fake news" yet frequently tweeting from the platform as the President of the United States put gatekeepers in an unfamiliar role in covering this

unconventional president where they were often left to decide which posts were newsworthy. “Journalists have long taken pride in their gatekeeping role, selecting from each day’s many developments those that are most deserving of the public’s attention and presenting them in a way that helps citizens understand what’s at issue, said Thomas Patterson, professor of government and the press at Harvard University (as cited in Bauder, paragraph 3, 2020). “Indiscriminate coverage of the president’s press conference sullies this tradition,” Patterson added. “One is left to wonder why. Is it ratings? Is it fear of Trump’s wrath? It certainly is not journalism.” Whatever the reason, Trump’s tweets are often news and has brought a difficult dynamic for gatekeepers.

Airing Trump’s social media posts has brought new challenges for traditional gatekeepers, but the aim of this study is to take a deep dive into how the MSM handles this content and process it in the sports world. This research focused on how the ESPN newsgatherers who produce the 6pm *SportsCenter* prioritized these social media posts in terms of where they place them in their sportscasts, but also how they present and frame them on the air. While research on this subject is limited, this study explored how often this online messaging has impacted the gatekeeping process. The research chronicled the specific storylines picked up by ESPN’s highly rated and respected *SportsCenter*, where this study will show the depths of this growing trend, not only in terms of the volume of these stories which are being aired, but how the most relevant stories are often broken by those athletes too. This is an important distinction for the purposes of illustrating how sports coverage is drastically changing as the research examined the way MSM is altering their approach as a result.

Ironically it was ESPN which launched this trend from an athlete who at the time didn’t even need a social media account, LeBron James had an hour of coveted network time at his

disposal. On July 8, 2010 James did the unprecedented by taking over the network's prized prime time slot and proceeded to control every aspect of the production in his now groundbreaking, 'The Decision' where he announced which team he would pick in free agency (Banagan, 2011).

James not only made history becoming the first athlete to take over his messaging in this fashion, but his move had many layers. 'Team Lebron' comprised of a management group of three friends James grew up with in Akron, Ohio and led by business manager Maverick Carter put in motion the calculated plan to get his messaging out on their terms (Ohlmeyer, 2010). This groundbreaking move saw Team Lebron not select any ESPN reporters to conduct the interview with James and instead opted to hand pick veteran broadcaster Jim Gray. James and his representatives would also take full control of every commercial spot sold during this prized slot where they donated the revenue to the Boys and Girls Club of America. Finally, ESPN may have been airing the special, but Team Lebron served as producers crafting the tone and scope of every second of this production (Ohlmeyer, 2010). This was an early sign of the potential for athletes to take full control of their messaging, yet the only difference was Lebron needed the assistance of the gatekeepers, this before the social media platforms enabled James and his peers to communicate from their respective platforms without the help of MSM.

The inner workings of ESPN were conflicted between the business and production factions who saw this production as a business coup against the collection of in-house gatekeepers who viewed this announcement as a distinct conflict of journalistic integrity (Ohlmeyer, 2010). ESPN's Senior VP for news Vince Doria admitted at the time "the agreement to broadcast The Decision, was made without any input from ESPN's news division which would prove to be catastrophic from an image standpoint" (as cited in Banagan, paragraph 18,

2011). As a result, several ESPN news executives were uncomfortable knowing they couldn't release any details of this special unless their own reporters were to uncover them, one of several conflicts of interests, yet they proceeded anyway (Ohlmeyer, 2010).

Host Jim Gray reflected in his book "Talking to GOATs" (Gray, 2020) on the long term impact of James' 'Decision' which while controversial at the time, was a revolutionary moment for all athletes and set the tone for them to one day be in control of their messaging. Gray (2020) noted, "For one, LeBron showed his fellow athletes that they could seize control of their own narratives, that they could tell their own stories, that they didn't have to present sanitized versions of their lives favored by PR departments, and that they didn't need to rely on traditional media to get their messages out" (p 277).

Gray in an interview with *Fox Sports'* Colin Cowherd noted the long term implications of 'The Decision' for future athletes especially in the context of social media, "The NBA players and all of sports, every player in sports owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to LeBron James" (Gray, Ji, 2020).

Twitter was launched four years before "The Decision," yet James and his peers hadn't taken advantage of their online platforms in the same fashion as he did on ESPN that July night in 2010. The NBA star was heavily criticized that evening, where the monumental moment will forever be a part of his legacy, but the long-term impact can't be understated, as the gatekeepers' role in messaging forever changed yet evolved into its current influence (Ohlmeyer, 2010). LeBron James is now the most popular American athlete on social media with over 46 million followers (Badenhausen, 2019). James' platform is so influential this research will show *SportsCenter* now airs posts from the basketball star on subjects beyond the sport he plays.

James remains a viable influencer on a plethora of subjects and on a variety of sports and social issues.

While James has played his entire career under the social media spotlight, Michael Jordan has acknowledged he's glad he avoided it during his career and has sympathy for those who have had to endure the pressures of being scrutinized online. When asked by *Cigar Aficionado* editor and publisher Marvin R. Shanken how fellow superstar Tiger Woods has changed, Jordan immediately pointed to the impact of social media on athletes: "I don't know if I could survive in this Twitter time, where you don't have the privacy that you would want, and what seems to be very innocent can always be misinterpreted" (Shanken, 2017). During Jordan's career, the media were undisputed gatekeepers and disseminated the messages through traditional means along with established local, regional and national news outlets. In the post-Jordan era, the newspaper industry is on the verge of extinction due to the faster means of acquiring information through social media (Siles, 2012). Studies also have shown cable subscriptions are increasingly declining due to more affordable and accessible streaming services (Tefertiller, 2018). Conversely, social media has increased its level of influence in news consumption where the industry has witnessed a power shift from the media gatekeepers to the athletes in the social media world taking advantage of their respective platforms (Bergstrom & Belfrage, 2018).

Renowned media philosopher Marshall McLuhan who coined the term 'the medium is the message' in the 1960's forecasted the effect of the internet nearly 30 years before it was invented (Levinson, 1999). Taylor (1999) interpreted the meaning of McLuhan's insight as a prediction of the influence of how new and innovative media technologies which would incite a change in the culture would ultimately alter the gatekeepers' approach. McLuhan may not have predicted the direct impact of how athletes could alter the newsgathering process, but his insight

proved accurate. The research in this study unveiled their influence, as it analyzed how this phenomenon has manifested itself in a sample of six weeks of ESPN's *SportsCenter* which has been a mainstay for sports fans the last four decades (Fang, 2014).

The value of this research is it provided clarity regarding how sports journalists in the social media era have adapted to the influence of the athletes taking over their messaging and how this has had an effect on traditional newsgathering practices. The research has provided insight into how the process got here and how the current changes have transformed the conventional gatekeeping approach. The results spelled out the athletes' increasingly relevant role and offered a detailed glimpse into how *SportsCenter* handled this new messaging which was seen in a number of ways. The research aimed to introduce themes regarding how *SportsCenter* used these social media posts both in terms of sources and for content creation purposes.

The research in this study traced the advent of gatekeeping theory, how it evolved with sports coverage and ultimately with athletes and social media. This study explored exactly the impact the athletes have on the daily content of ESPN's *SportsCenter* and specifically how these subjects are positioned with these shows when it comes to their social media posts. The method section explained in detail how thematic analysis assisted in finding the optimum results for this study. The results of the research illustrated how often this online messaging was used and specifically what the relevance of it was. Finally, the study discussed the impact of the research's findings in terms of how this phenomenon is defined, its current influence on the gatekeeping process and what future contributions could mean for the broadcasting industry moving forward.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping was theorized over 70 years ago by German/American psychologist Kurt Lewin who developed the concept, not by researching how media outlets control their messages, but by how the head of households managed it. Lewin's initial case study surrounded the routine of random housewives, who were the ultimate nightly decision makers when it came to what the family would have for dinner (Lewin, 1947). He concluded while these original gatekeepers would share the power with the family, these housewives were the ultimate decision makers (Lewin, 1947).

Former Boston University professor David Manning White expanded Lewin's gatekeeping theory in a media context as he became the first to perform research in this regard as he shadowed a newspaper editor to see how he and his staff would decide which stories were the most newsworthy (White, 1950). White's work involved a week of seeing the process on the front lines in how stories were accepted and rejected. White's efforts were groundbreaking at a time where he concluded, "(These) gate sections are governed either by impartial rules or by 'gate keepers' and in the latter case an individual or group is 'in power' for making the decision between in and out" (White, 1950 p 383).

For years viewers heard the news through the same voices. Network anchorman like Walter Cronkite held the role of being a dominant gatekeeper for decades and was replaced by Dan Rather who would assume the position for decades after, but that sort of continuity is absent

in today's climate (Ristow, 2013). The lack of stability coupled with the dramatic change in the way consumers see news has altered the gatekeeping process. The trend has evolved from viewers having watched three primary networks to graduating to cable operators to currently leaning on streaming services to get their information. In 2019, research by the consulting firm Deloitte illustrated the growing trend where 69% of consumers pay for some type of internet video streaming service (Brantner, 2019). This is a sharp contrast from only ten years prior where in 2009 just 10% of consumers subscribed these services. Traditional media didn't have to deal with this dynamic or the complexities of a president who used a twitter account for his purposes (Wells, Shah and Lukito, 2020).

The evolution of gatekeeping theory has influenced the media's newsgathering protocol. Lewin created the theory and White added further substance for a process which for decades was measured by the work of newspapers. Early newspapers were merely a byproduct of news from political parties which included small staffs, often comprised of one-man shops (Holiday, 2018). The dynamic of newspapers changed with the dawn of yellow journalism which featured flashy headlines, unneeded pictures, fraudulent interviews, stories leaning largely on anonymous sources and several stories dedicated to local events which catered to the wealthy (Holiday, 2018). Famous newspaper publishers such as James Gordon Bennett Sr, Joseph Pulitzer and William Hearst became wealthy in this era due to the rising popularity of this platform, yet as a result the credibility of news suffered from a journalistic standpoint (Crouthamel & Jackson, 1973).

New York Times publisher Adolph S Ochs led the charge to change the perception of newspapers as his vision set the tone for gatekeepers for decades to come (Silverman, 1996). Ochs completely altered the mindset of the industry from sensationalism stories to a clear focus

on objective journalism. After establishing himself in Tennessee by transforming several papers in cities such as Chattanooga, Ochs then purchased the struggling *New York Times*. By decreasing daily rates, adding needed substance to their coverage and creating a catchy ad, “All the News That’s Fit to Print,” Ochs popularized what is now one of our country’s most impactful news outlets (Silverman, 1996).

Ochs’ work significantly impacted the gatekeeping process moving forward. His work with the Times had the industry giving more credence to the reputation of a newspaper over the past shock factor narratives. Reporters began to take more pride in their craft, starting social clubs where they critiqued each other’s work and established new standards of ethics (Holiday, 2018). It was the dawn of journalism in the United States where the business become more credible and those involved felt an obligation to the accuracy of their work and the impact it had on their collective audiences (Holiday, 2018). The efforts of Ochs set the tone for the thinking of Lewin and subsequently the gatekeeping newspaper research of White.

While newspaper and radio gatekeepers were the prime influencers for the next two decades, beginning in 1948, televisions became commonplace in American homes with the dawn of both national and local newscasts (Viku, 2002). This medium gave gatekeepers a newfound ability to send their messages visually and reach more people than ever before (Viku, 2002).

CBS were the pioneers launching the first nightly news program in the country in May of 1948. NBC would produce its own the next year and ABC three years after that. A groundbreaking analysis of the gatekeeping practices of all three networks was done by Hebert J Gans, who researched the networks practices along with popular publication *Newsweek* in a comprehensive study which spanned over two different decades. Gans analyzed two periods in both the sixties (1965-1969) and seventies (1975-1978). His study included several one on one

interviews with the respective staffs, months of participant observation, a content analysis of 3500 stories and detailed literature reviews concentrating on the sociology of news articles which were the basis for Lewin's original theory (Gans, 1980).

Gans' findings had him establish six values of news gathering. The components included ethnocentrism, the belief in responsible capitalism, individualism, moderatism along with the degree of social order, the intense need for strong national leadership and news which has a tendency to have a serious class bias which ultimately leans toward the status quo (Gans, 1980).

These values were punctuated by the gatekeepers' reliance on stories based on class structure where Gans' major premises in this study found the national news stories were often concentrated on the upper class where the majority of these stories featured favorable themes (Gans, 1980). Conversely, this research showed stories surrounding the lower class often resulted in bad connotations. Gans' research found news organizations as a whole were dominated by a middle-class mindset and often swayed by the values of the producers who adopted this thinking when planning their daily newscasts (Gans, 1980). This ideology of the gatekeepers had a strong influence on the daily content.

The growing importance of the gatekeepers was evident as news became a bigger part of U.S culture but with it came more theories on how they were putting their respective newscasts together. In the seventies, a theory accepted by many social scientists found that network gatekeepers encouraged their reporters to cover events which were often easier, more affordable and ultimately would attract the largest audiences (Gans, 1973). This line of thinking was expanded by Edward Jay Epstein in what became known as the Edward Epstein Theory (Epstein,1975).

In researching journalists in the late sixties, Epstein concluded finances played a crucial part of the gatekeeping process (Epstein, 1975). With networks cutting back on their budgets and subsequently their crews, stories were chosen which were the easiest for these organizations to cover. Epstein's research discovered that for these gatekeepers to find the most cost efficient, yet effective news, they must concentrate on those stories which delivered the best visual components. In addition, gatekeepers are constrained by the limits of their network's policies which hindered their ability to cover controversial stories such as the F.C.C fairness doctrine and race riots (Gans, 1973). Epstein concluded that gatekeepers during this era had so many limitations from both a financial and technical perspective, that as a result, they were unable to cover the news in a fashion which had traditionally been considered viable.

The gatekeeping theory has seen a gradual maturation over the years. In 1960 mass communications expert Wilbur Schramm showcased the human element of the process. Schramm's research concluded gatekeepers process information through both media chains and interpersonal chains (Schramm, 1983). His findings shed light that gatekeepers are able to perform three key tasks: process information, evaluate it and decide if it's worth airing or not (Buckalew, 1960).

In the 1970s, sociologist Gaye Tuchman further advanced the gatekeeping theory by closely shadowing journalists specifically to deduce how they categorized their respective stories (Tuchman, 1978). Tuchman concluded how a reporter designates a select category has a great deal of influence on how a news event is covered. Her findings shed light on the dynamic in how news events are positioned by the media as a crucial aspect of the gatekeeping process (Tuchman, 1978).

While Schramm, Tuchman and a host of others contributed to the advancement of the gatekeeping theory, professor and noted gatekeeping theorist Pamela Shoemaker brought it back to the forefront to the social science community with her groundbreaking research in 1991. Shoemaker's comprehensive facelift of the theory served as a broad look by closely examining not only the work of the news media and media organizations, but she also included social institutions and social systems in her research (Shoemaker, 1991). Shoemaker gathered her research through a series of informative models which became the academic standard for the many processes that affect the collective gatekeepers (Shoemaker, 1991). Shoemaker (1991) noted during that time that gatekeeping should be defined as, "the process by which billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day" (as cited in Shoemaker, 1991 pp.1-2).

Shoemaker's reputation on gatekeeping expanded in 2009 as she collaborated with Tim Vos with what is regarded by several in the field as the most comprehensive overview of the theory. The authors traced the origins of Levin to come up with an updated model along with a revised definition of the theory. According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009) "Gatekeeping is the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day, and it is the center of the media's role in modern public life" (as cited in Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p. 1).

Beyond re-defining gatekeeping theory, Shoemaker and Vos introduced the theory into a modern realm by factoring in the impact of both the internet and online media. This was important as many scholars had surmised that the increase of technology would spell the decline of gatekeeping but their research dispelled those conclusions. With these emerging dynamics, the authors researched how the different goals of these entities affected how news was disseminated

in the 21st century along with how it was shaped along these many new platforms that past gatekeepers didn't have to encounter (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). They concluded through looking at the theory from an environmental, globalization and modern communication perspective that the key remains to understand all of the forces that shape the news gathering process while paying close attention to why news takes on its current contexts. (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

While athletes are increasingly becoming effective online, President Donald Trump took the concept to a different level by using Twitter as a springboard in winning the 2016 election and continued the trend as he made it his *modus operandi* while in office (Wells, 2020). Trump often directed his narrative daily on Twitter and in the process frequently attempted to take the credibility from the MSM as he characterized their coverage as fake news (Al Rawi, 2018).

In a study breaking down MSM's reports which compared so called fake news to news found on social media, the results uncovered a distinct bias from MSM (Al Rawi, 2018). The researchers included a content analysis of over eight million tweets and 1,350 news stories where they found a significant difference in the way fake news is presented in MSM compared to SNS (Social Network Users) (Al Rawi, 2018).

Trump's approach has set the tone in an everchanging media climate where once conventional outlets who traditionally aired objective reports now deliver more partisan leanings in their broadcasts (Ross & Caldwell, 2020). MSM networks such as Fox News Channel and MSNBC both cater to their conservative and liberal audiences respectively. This partisan trend is evident even at the local level where Sinclair Broadcast group, the largest owner of U.S. local television stations has presented content which repeatedly has supported conservative beliefs (Stetler, 2018).

After tracing the origins of traditional gatekeeping, the next section delved into the evolution of sports coverage which explored the advent of ESPN and *SportsCenter* and focused on the genesis of how the modern athlete has evolved via social media.

Evolution of Sports Coverage

The beginnings of sports coverage in the United States can be traced back to the 1820's with the debut of the first American magazine dedicated to sports. This platform was sparked by the influence of the sports magazine trend in Great Britain which ignited a competitive market in the states where seven sports magazines debuted in a 10-year span yet only two would last more than three years (McChesney, 1989). The main sports coverage in these publications surrounded a definite class structure where the American upper class was interested in horse racing while the lower class was lured to boxing (McChesney, 1989). Publisher James Gordon Bennett's New York Herald was a pioneer in the sports media where it took pride in their coverage of many sports, this despite the fact that featuring sports in a newspaper at the time wasn't a respected practice. There was an acceleration of sports coverage during the Civil War where it was commonplace to see sports in most major newspapers (Crouthamel, 1973).

The sports media saw a jump in the roaring 1920's, which is considered by some as the "Golden Age of Sports" (Grundy & Radar, 2016). During that decade, coverage of sports moved from a novelty to a vital part of every American newspaper. In the age of yellow journalism, sports media took on several endearing qualities as it was often full of controversy yet was rarely offensive in its context. In addition, sports coverage became accepted more in the mainstream media which often promoted both civic and social causes and viewed this coverage as an impactful way to promote select events in the community (Grundy & Radar 2016).

The 1920's saw a rise in the American sports celebrity as seen on the field and in the press box where both athletes and sportswriters were simultaneously becoming household names. While the most attention was reserved for the likes of the biggest names of this era in baseball player Babe Ruth and boxing's Jack Dempsey, sportswriters like Grantland Rice and Paul Gallico also were gaining acclaim for their newspaper coverage along with many of their peers (Inabinett,1994).

The period between the 1920's and 1950's saw the breakout of sports coverage in newspapers and the birth of hearing and seeing sports on both radio and television. For perspective on the growth during that time period in 1922 a radio was found in only one of every 400 homes compared to 1929 when one-third of the population owned one (Spalding, 1963).

Television overtook radio as the prime source for sports in the 1960's. One of the most influential figures was NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle. The former public relations professional used his background to reshape the league's image where television was at the forefront. Upon taking over in 1960, Rozelle rescued the NFL from being an unpopular and often dysfunctional league to a mainstay in American homes as he understood the importance and impact of television. He negotiated an exclusive TV deal which put the NFL on one network where each franchise could share an equal amount of revenues (Anderson, 2008). Rozelle had a gift for bringing people together as he helped merge the NFL with the America Football Conference (AFL) in 1966, popularized the Super Bowl and developed the entity NFL Films production house, which further showcased the league and its personalities. All of this was made possible because of Rozelle's vision and consistent ability to foster deals with eventually all four American television networks. For perspective Rozelle's three decades of work paved the way for the NFL to see their TV deals start from \$20 million in 1960 to the current NFL television

package which totals \$ 5 “billion” *per year* (Battaglio, 2020). Rozelle’s early negotiations paved the way for current announcers like Tony Romo to make \$18 million annually, the same amount he made as a starting quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys (Battaglio, 2020).

At the same time Pete Rozelle was reshaping the NFL into a television juggernaut, Boone Arledge was making the same mark in sports programming. Arledge made an impact over several generations of not only negotiating landmark TV deals but reinventing the way viewers watched sports. “Arledge changed the television viewing habits of Americans, transforming the way in which television covers sport, altered the nature and character of American sport and transformed the way in which television presents reality to the American public” (as cited in Crepeau, 2002, p 357).

Arledge’s talents were on display early as a young assistant producer for ABC, where he demanded his crew institute sideline cameras for college football broadcasts (Crepeau,2002). This forever changed the way viewers watched sporting events as for the first time the audience was able to experience the emotion from the players who started the trend of saying “Hi Mom” to the sideline cameras which ultimately became a tradition among athletes in every sport. (Crepeau, 2002).

It wasn’t merely a coincidence that the country’s sports explosion in the sixties happened when Arledge’s work came to light. During this decade, he launched “Wild World of Sports” in 1961 and negotiated the network’s first Olympic TV deal. In the 1970’s, Arledge would start yet another American staple in Monday Night Football. These endeavors included innovations such as instant replay and the slow-motion effect. He quickly rose to the ranks of the head of ABC Sports where during his early tenure in the 1970’s, the annual number of network hours of sports

programming escalated from 787 to 1,356 hours a year. Those numbers would then double from 1974 to 1984 (McChesney, 1989).

Arrival of SportsCenter

While Arledge was recognized as the leader of sports innovation for decades, ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network) gets the credit for launching the country's first all-sports network. The timing was perfect as ESPN hit the air a year before CNN and two years before the arrival of MTV (McGuire, 2015).

ESPN's founder Bill Rasmussen conceived the idea of an all-sports network after being let go by the World Hockey Association's Hartford Whalers in 1978 (Schawbel, 2012). Initially, he wanted to call it ESP (Entertainment and Sports Programming), but the name would change after Rasmussen gathered content providers, a major sponsor in Budweiser, a growing list of cable operators yet the big coup was hauling in a credible main investor (Vogan, 2015). Rasmussen's ability to negotiate a deal with Getty Oil to pay ten million dollars for an 85% share of the network in February of 1979 gave the network now dubbed ESPN the support it needed to start making an impact. ("In brief", 1979, McGuire, 2015).

SportsCenter fittingly was the first show on ESPN's official start date September 7, 1979 (Sipocz, 2015). On the inaugural show, anchor Lee Leonard appropriately set the tone by saying, "If you're a fan, what you will see in the next few minutes, hours, and days to follow may convince you that you've gone to sports heaven" (as cited in Sipocz, 2015, p 86).

The results weren't immediate, but ESPN witnessed steady growth where they graduated from minor sporting events to brokering deals with every major sporting network. ESPN started by broadcasting in 1.4 million homes where it's viewers would grow accustomed to hearing the network's new self-titled moniker, "Worldwide Leader in Sports," in 1998 (McGuire, 2015).

ESPN has been the most watched sports network for decades, consistently finishing among the top five rated major cable networks in the country. At the end of the Nielsen ratings period in 2019, the all sports network ranked third overall behind Fox News and MSNBC yet in the all-important adult 18-49 demographic, ESPN was number one with an average of 730,000 viewers (Andreeva & Johnson, 2019). These numbers have become commonplace for the network as they have led the 18-49 demographic for the last 14 years (Nagle, 2019). Furthermore, ESPN produced cable's nine most-viewed shows in 2018 and remarkably 18 of the top 20 overall (Nagle, 2019).

Acquiring more live events was crucial but the turning point for ESPN was an added emphasis into making *SportsCenter* relevant. From 1980-2001 it had had trailed CNN's *Sports Tonight* in the ratings, but things changed in 1987 when ESPN president Steve Bornstein brought in respected newsman John Walsh as a consultant (Vogan, 2015). Walsh had founded the popular monthly magazine *Inside Sports* and had been the publisher of *Rolling Stone*, *U.S. News & World Report* along with the *Washington Post* (Vogan, 2015). His arrival brought a new mindset to the network with the goal of elevating *SportsCenter* as the network's signature show. After being afforded the opportunity to get an overall view of the network, Walsh concluded when first taking the job, "The only thing you have permanently here on a 365-day basis is *SportsCenter*. So why not invest resources in *SportsCenter* and make it the nightly gathering place for sports fans?" (as cited in Vogan, 2015, p. 31).

Walsh's impact was visible as he complemented the network's lineup of entertaining personalities such as Chris Berman and Dick Vitale with experienced journalists such as Peter Gammons and Andrea Kremer (Farred, 2000). Walsh added news bureaus with the hopes of creating more breaking news and revamped *SportsCenter's* daily rundowns to mimic the look of

a daily newspaper sports section. The results were immediate as ESPN led the way in stories such as Pete Rose's suspension and subsequent lifetime ban from Major League Baseball and were the only news organization to be on the scene in Oakland following its infamous earthquake during the 1989 World Series. (Farred, 2000).

Walsh's moves gradually made *SportsCenter* the respected gatekeepers of sports coverage in the United States, "A couple sports editors told me that they watched the early (6:00 pm) *SportsCenter* show because it helped them with their decision-making for the next day's front page," Walsh said upon taking over in 1988 (as cited in Vogan, 2015, p. 33). "That was the first indication that we were having some impact beyond what we were doing" (as cited in Vogan, 2015, p.33).

In the 1990's *SportsCenter* remained a valued news source but added more flair and personality. According to Travis Vogan, who wrote the book *ESPN: The Making of a Sports Media Empire*, "*SportsCenter* became the primary instrument through which ESPN built and vocalized this (sports hangout) culture," (as cited in Vogan, 2015, pg 34). Anchors Keith Olbermann and Dan Patrick labeled their 11 pm *SportsCenter* "The Big Show," which sparked a trend of countless catch phrases, creative one-liners and eventually a series of *SportsCenter* commercials which made both anchors household names (Vogan, 2015).

While Olbermann would eventually leave for *Fox Sports*, Patrick became the mainstay and arguably the most famous *SportsCenter* anchor in ESPN history. His style was entertaining but substantive where ironically Patrick's first year at the network coincided with the hiring of Walsh who brought him over from top competitor CNN, further proof of his commitment to bringing in the best journalists. Walsh's mission of making *SportsCenter* the gatekeepers of the industry fit perfectly with what Patrick was looking for "John Walsh wanted nothing less than to

change the face of sports television,” Patrick said a decade later. Walsh “wanted ESPN to be the place to go if you wanted to know everything about what’s going on in sports. He wanted me to help take it to another level” (as cited in Lisheran).

SportsCenter would become the industry standard in large part due to the work of Walsh and Patrick where fans tuned in during a time, athletes would lean on ESPN for their sports news. During those years, sports figures without social media platforms trusted anchors like Patrick to the degree they would provide both access and information which would often lead to breaking news. Former Major League first baseman Mark Grace echoed the sentiments of many of his peers by saying athletes felt comfortable confiding in ESPN anchors like Patrick, “He’s very knowledgeable about sports,” Grace told (as cited in Lisheran, 1999) “I think players know he can ask tough questions without trashing them, he does what he does with respect,” Grace said (as cited in Lisheran, 1999). Athletes having these kinds of relationships with broadcasters were common in this era especially for those gifted enough like Patrick to take advantage, but the new century would usher in a new era featuring added technology and subsequently social media. These two factors which would change the established gatekeeping process and set the tone for athletes to control their messaging moving forward (DiMoro, 2015).

This century ESPN tinkered with *SportsCenter* by going away from its traditional format. They changed direction and promoted a template which highlighted more debate by bringing in print journalists Jemele Hill and Michael Smith to anchor the 6pm EST shows. During this time the network was criticized for being too political as Hill didn’t shy away from offering her opinion on air or on social media. In 2017 she tweeted “Donald Trump is a white supremacist who has largely surrounded himself with other white supremacists” (Hill, 2017). This was one of

many tweets that resulted in Hill's suspension, ultimate dismissal and left once dominant *SportsCenter* with dwindling ratings (Strauss, 2018).

In recent years, ESPN has brought back familiar faces in Keith Olbermann and Chris Berman along with longtime *SportsCenter* producer Norby Williamson who told the *Washington Post* in 2018, "Let's not overthink *SportsCenter*. The goal is to get more people to watch today than watched yesterday" (as cited in Strauss, paragraph 26, 2018). The result had *SportsCenter's* 6pm show see an improvement in its ratings with shows anchored by veteran anchors Kevin Negandhi and Sage Steele. "I think we've recommitted to what people expect from us," Steele told the *Washington Post*. "Just as I would have watched the CBS Evening News show with Dan Rather, I want my information. This is the same thing—just sports" (as cited in Strauss, paragraph 23, 2018) Williamson concurred while acknowledging that *SportsCenter*, in its revamped yet traditional format benefits from having video air on both espn.com and Twitter. "We fell into that trap a little bit," Williamson acknowledged to the *Post* "We de-emphasized the video and the storytelling" (Strauss, paragraph 20, 2018).

Both entities are a big part of ESPN anchor Scott Van Pelt's late midnight *SportsCenter* whose ratings consistently top all late-night talk shows on broadcast or cable for the invaluable male 18-34 sports demographic (Strauss, 2018). Van Pelt and many of his peers remember doing their jobs before social media. In those days news was often gathered by checking the Associated Press wire or by calling coaches or players directly to gather breaking news. Even with the advent of the internet back in the late nineties, traditional media would dictate the story with better access to athletes who didn't have another option to reach the masses.

Van Pelt, who remains active online, understands the emerging dynamic of the gatekeepers including content from athletes' posts on social media. In an interview with his

former network *Golf Channel* and host David Feherty, (Feherty, 2020), Van Pelt who remains active online described the new landscape, “It’s become this giant cocktail party for media folks. I think you find out a lot of information there. There are a lot of athletes there who now choose to be in control of their message and that’s where they want to share what they think” (Feherty, 2020).

Athletes and Social Media

The evolution of athletes impacting the gatekeeping process has been gradual but to understand how it took shape and its ultimate effectiveness, the growing intensity must be assessed of both the athletes’ fan bases from a macro point of view and the political climate which has grown at a similar rate. When Twitter arrived in 2006 for the athletes, it initially didn’t seem like an opportunity to take control of their messages. Instead it initially served as an opportunity to have fun and exhibit unusual interaction with their collective fanbases. For years the only exchanges athletes had with their fans was before or after their games, but social media now offered daily opportunities (Williams and Chinn, 2014).

Many studies in the early stages of this dynamic showed the main motivation for athletes posting on social media were for self-promotion purposes. Smith and Sanderson (2019) outlined categories such as vanity, showing off their families or promoting their collective charities took precedence (Smith and Sanderson 2019). The rise in athletes stamp on social media was seen at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro labeled the world’s first social games, where over 630 million posts were related to the games and its athletes (Xu, 2019).

While social media had more of a positive tone early on, it was also a contributing factor to negative stories such as the 2011 Vancouver riots which ensued after the hometown Canucks lost to the Boston Bruins in the Stanley Cup Finals. The fallout was an onslaught of social media

outrage where both the MSM and the fans created a level of online intensity rarely witnessed in the early stages of Twitter (Burch, 2015). The study Smith (2019) concluded fans are more involved with social media while watching sporting events. This research used the uses and gratification theory to conclude fans who actively post during games receive a higher level of engagement (Smith, 2019).

While fans involvement with their teams increased, so did the players involvement with their respective platforms. Today's stars like Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver JuJu Smith Schuster graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated* not only for his elite play, but mostly because of his unique social media prowess (McKnight,2019). The majority of the article raved about how the young Steeler has made MSM news for popular online stories such as his 2017 Instagram series which spotlighted of all things the search for his stolen bike. Smith-Schuster also uses his online platform to market himself where he routinely includes corporate partners like Doritos or Pepsi to pitch products on his timeline (McKnight, 2019). The majority of Smith-Schuster's posts endear him to his fanbase such as when he announced he would be willing to play football with his social media followers at a local mall or arrange to fill in as a prom date for those who put in requests. (McKnight, 2019) Even this NFL wide receiver's French bulldog, "Boujee" has over 200,000 Instagram followers where being a popular and often good news online influencer has served his platform well "What I do with social media, with my YouTube, my gaming, my personality) that's art," Smith-Schuster told *Sports Illustrated* (as cited in McKnight, 2019, p 35).

Social media has changed sports coverage significantly in a short amount of time. Only 14 years after Twitter came onto the scene, in 2020 it was recognized as the most popular online medium for breaking news (Aslam, 2020). The difference in the gatekeepers "and" those athletes

posting relevant content on social media is both pitch in while feeding off each other in getting news to their collective fanbases. Instead of traditional means such as newspapers, television and radio, social media is the main source for breaking information where in 2020 it was discovered a remarkable five million tweets were sent per day (Aslam, 2020). The growth of this platform is heightened for sports coverage as research concluded the primary users of Twitter are 35 to 49-year-old men which is a valued demographic for those who regularly consume and market sports coverage (Gregory, 2009).

Studies have unveiled the different motivations for journalists to use Twitter which include the need for information, self-fulfillment, the desire for more influence and its assistance with work efficiency (Kim, 2016). Kim's study incorporated the Uses and Gratifications theory to discover social media can be advantageous for journalists who by using platforms such as Twitter benefit with recognition for their work and see it provide greater communication and engagement with their audiences (Kim, 2016). A big takeaway from this study found journalists increased use of social media in their work has them opening up more possibilities for a shared gatekeeping role with their audiences who are now more inclined to participate in the process (Kim, 2016).

Today's athletes don't know a life which doesn't include the Twitterverse. For example, the number one overall pick in the 2018 NFL draft, Cleveland Browns quarterback Baker Mayfield was 11 years old when Twitter launched. The Browns quarterback saw an opening during his second NFL season in 2019 where after becoming agitated with a Cleveland writer during a weekly press conference stormed out and subsequently took his frustrations out on his Twitter account. Mayfield's tweets took precedence over what he said in the press conference among both the fans and the media. The headlines in the paper the next day weren't quotes from

Mayfield's presser, but rather his thoughts on social media as images of his tweets were omnipresent on several MSM reports (Botte, 2019). For example, after Mayfield's outburst, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* released a video from their three beat writers on its *cleveland.com* website (Labbe and Cabot, 2019). The length of the video was 2:48 but 1:24 of the recap was spent breaking down Mayfield's tweets, not what he said during his press conference (Labbe and Cabot, 2019).

Mayfield tweeted "Everybody wants to hear the truth until they actually get it I am who I am and always have been. Don't call it emotional when it's convenient and then passion when it fits. I care about winning, so yeah I'm frustrated" (Mayfield,2019). Afterwards, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* video recap broke down Mayfield's tweets where writer Ellis L Williams said "What was most interesting to me was the tweet afterwards (Labbe and Cabot, 2019)." Instead of images of Mayfield leaving a press conference or anything he said during it, the heart of this MSM story became his thoughts from his brand, on social media (Labbe and Cabot, 2019).

Controversial wide receiver Antonio Brown led several narratives via social media in 2019. His tweets dominated network airwaves where his posts led news cycles for months (McDonald, 2019). Brown didn't have to conduct any interviews as his tweets and Instagram posts became lead stories beginning when he demanded a trade from the Pittsburgh Steelers to his arrival and eventual departure with the Oakland Raiders and finally his brief tenure with the New England Patriots. All three stops featured extensive network aired social media posts, as the troubled superstar served as an impactful influencer to content on MSM. Brown even hired social media consultants to expedite his moves during this tumultuous journey (Mortensen, 2019).

When it came to Brown, all the MSM were airing his tweets at each level (local, regional and national). His posts served as the main stories for the majority of the NFL offseason and exemplified the importance MSM put on this story in a variety of ways (Doherty, 2019). Often Brown's posts were newsworthy but (Doherty, 2019) showed that repeatedly several news outlets were just airing whatever tweet popped up on Brown's timeline to create click worthy content. It was an extreme online soap opera which lasted for months where the media absorbed every turn from this athletes' messaging.

While Brown and Mayfield often thrived off being in control of their messages, it isn't always a positive outcome. Mayfield's former teammate and Browns' safety Jermaine Whitehead randomly vented on Twitter after a bad game. What ensued next was a backlash from Browns fans online, which escalated Whitehead's frustration where he retaliated by sending out a series of tweets full of expletives such as "Imma kill you (expletive) that's on blood," (as cited in Reyes, paragraph 11, 2019).

Unlike his quarterback Mayfield, Whitehead crossed the line and paid the price by immediately getting cut by Cleveland. His apology wasn't in front of a camera or a one on one with a select reporter, instead Whitehead took his messaging to Twitter but this time it was too late. Athletes owning their message often helps their brand (Smith & Sanderson, 2015) but in Whitehead's case the method backfired where his fan base revolted and his decision-making cost him his job (Reyes, 2019).

While today's interaction between athletes and the public is mixed between being confrontational or conciliatory, the majority of the early interactions were positive. Ann Pegoraro (2010) analyzed a variety of interactions from athletes in different sports following the first four years after Twitter was launched. (Pegoraro, 2010). Her research concluded the biggest

motivation for the athletes 10 years ago wasn't delivering their messaging from their platforms. Remarkably, the biggest reason for communicating online for athletes was simply fan interaction. In terms of context, the findings saw most of the interactions came via direct messages between fans and athletes (Pegoraro, 2010).

For perspective on how things have changed for athletes on social media, Sanderson (2016) offered an example just six years later. While athletes initially enjoyed Twitter for being fan friendly at first, the relationship grew more adversarial over the years as seen in a study done in the #AskJameis social media campaign revolving around former Florida State quarterback Jameis Winston (Sanderson, 2016). Normally, a school promoting a quarterback coming off a national championship and Heisman trophy winning season would be ideal, yet Winston was an outlier. The standout quarterback was talented but equally as troubled where off the field he had faced numerous accusations for crimes such as rape and shoplifting. Winston's critics were numerous on social media and remained skeptical which didn't bode well for the success of this online promotion.

FSU's #AskJameis campaign was launched on Florida State's football twitter account in August of 2014, right before Winston's redshirt sophomore season on Florida State's football twitter account. It asked #Noles fans to provide Winston questions and encouraged them to use the hashtag #AskJameis in their posts (Sanderson, 2016). The criteria were left wide open resulting in a scenario which dangerously gave the fans a virtual free for all to interact with the reigning best player in college football, yet given Winston's polarizing reputation, allowing the social media world to have free reign turned toxic in a hurry.

The reaction was immediate and so overwhelmingly negative that Florida State had to cancel this campaign after only a day on Twitter. This resulted in a small sample size yet the

findings were revealing in a number of ways, none which were favorable to either Winston or Florida State (Sanderson, 2016)

The five most popular categories of the #AskJameis campaign included Winston's legal record, general sarcasm at Winston and FSU, references to Winston being coddled by the school during crisis along with many tweets referencing Winston's lack of intelligence. The dominant category was reserved for Florida State though as the majority of posts questioned the school's thought process regarding the launch of this controversial campaign (Sanderson, 2016).

School officials underestimated the power of social media as Winston was an easy target, and his online critics took full advantage, further damaging the reputation of both the Heisman winner while inflicting harm to the school's reputation. The results of this research showed the depths to how the relationship between athletes and fans had changed over the years on social media. What once was an engaging relationship had grown to be adversarial yet showed the potential damage an athlete's presence on online platforms could create.

The evolution of athletes like Winston garnering increased scrutiny on social media often begins during college but for the majority of NFL players it escalates a great deal when they enter the NFL draft. Examining the implications of college football players turning professional and what factors impact them moving forward, (Su, 2020) compared what impacted a players' social media presence in the days leading up to the draft and then the days following it.

The results show how quickly an athletes' social media presence can develop as well as what an integral part it is to their overall brand. Not surprisingly, the study concluded the players selected in the higher rounds received a bigger increase in followers on their social media platforms (Su, 2020). The players can't control which teams draft them, but this study concluded those going to franchise's with strong social media sites received a greater benefit by having a

more energized fan base. It also showed the value these athletes received by getting pre-draft promotion from the league (Su, 2000).

These players can control where they go to college though and those who attended Division 1 schools usually bolstered their brand more than those attending smaller schools. Even within major football conferences like the SEC, this study reported there was a markedly greater difference between schools such as LSU compared to Ole Miss in terms of social media presence (Su, 2020). All of these factors both in college and the NFL set the tone for these athlete's profile as professionals, in which they would go on to choose if they want to use these platforms in building their respective brands.

Evolution of Gatecrashing

Some saw this phenomenon affecting gatekeeping theory years prior to the dawn of the internet and social media. The aforementioned Hebert Gans was a pioneer in this area formulating his two-tiered media model decades ago, which aimed to illustrate how the gatekeeping process would one day morph into a shared experience with those who could pose influence on the content through their social media platforms (Gans,1983). Gans' model was comprised of two tiers, the first represented MSM while the second was predicted to include a complementary wave of new national media entities which represented specific audiences who would provide multiple perspectives of both current and breaking news content (Gans, 1983). While Gans didn't reference the social media variable in his study, his model would be prophetic in its effect on how it would eventually impact the conventional gatekeeping process. At the time, Gans was unable to identify a pathway to complete how his vision would eventually take shape, yet history would reward his rare insight (Gans,1983).

Gatecrashing variables would eventually alter traditional gatekeeping practices which included several innovations via modern technology which became available in the 21st century, with the majority coming online beginning with blogging outlets then graduating to the many platforms on social media.

In 2005 President George W. Bush was highly criticized for nominating his longtime friend Harriet Miers for appointment to the U.S Supreme Court (Bruns, 2010). This story personified how the traditional practices had changed, where CNN aired stories such as “what bloggers think” giving newfound credibility to a wide variety of news and political blogs within their coverage (Bruns, 2010).

The gatekeeping process was transformed by the growing pull of outside forces just as Gans had predicted decades earlier. “They have added a second tier of news media which comments on, critiques and regularly corrects the mainstream news” (Bruns, 2010, p 248). Early on these nonconventional sources were portrayed by many as citizen journalists who were highlighted by a version of storytelling which was more focused yet didn’t feature several of the conflict-based storylines the MSM traditionally aired (Meikle, 2002). For many the content these newfound outlets were delivering to the MSM brought a fresh and vibrant slant to political news coverage where it “points to the potential of a reinvigoration of discussion, debate and deliberation on political matters, beyond the polarized and polarizing coverage of the MSM” (Rushkoff, 2003, p 16).

This changing of the guard meant a restart for many on how journalists told stories and delivered the news. “If journalism is indeed about informing the community and lifting up our fellow citizens, we need to evolve. We need to tell better stories and, while doing so, we need to engage the world” (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p 60).

While political coverage delivered early examples of the positive reception of these emerging forces, there were detractors on the influence of this new wave of second tier media. Nate Silver developed an innovative forecasting model which accurately predicted the outcome of 49 of the 50 states in the 2008 U.S. Presidential election between Barack Obama and John McCain (James, 2009). Four years later, Silver would predict all 50 states correctly when Obama won his re-election bid against Mitt Romney (Taylor, 2012). Silver's accurate forecasting notably in politics and sports landed him fame and fortune but inspired a new generation of bloggers, and subsequent online influencers whom have set a disturbing trend for many in the newsgathering process (Toff, 2017).

The so called "Nate Silver effect" is defined as the growing fascination MSM has in garnering poll results from a myriad of outlets in their political coverage, often leading to mixed reviews from a credibility standpoint (Toff, 2017). This phenomenon saw traditional gatekeeping practices of computer-run phone technology, sampling of households and targeted interviews replaced by gatecrashing measures such as Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and internet-based surveys (Toff, 2017).

Proponents lauded this new wave of media influence for its innovative approach while their critics ripped the Nate Silver Effect which enabled less credible outlets that increased content but often lacked editorial standards and heightened partisan agendas. The result ultimately transferred on to social media with an assortment of political blogs which were routinely picked up by MSM outlets (Toff, 2017). These political threats to traditional gatekeepers set the tone for many as for the purposes of this research, this study concentrates on the impact of pro athletes infiltrating the gatekeeping process, specifically their influence on social media.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How is athlete content used in the context of *SportsCenter*?

RQ2: How are the athletes and their content positioned when their stories are broadcast on *SportsCenter*?

METHOD

This study employed thematic analysis to closely examine the stories *SportsCenter* aired between January 27, 2020 and March 6, 2020 regarding the multitude of social media posts from athletes. The research broke these stories into pertinent categories based on whether they led these shows, drove the content or served in a complementary role to an already established story. Specifically, the research looked into how the entire spectrum of the athletes' messaging impacted *SportsCenter's* daily rundown and in turn how it ultimately affected the framing of their daily sportscasts.

Thematic analysis is defined as a method for analyzing and reporting patterns and themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the purposes of this research, this method helped organize data in rich detail and interpret various aspects of a research topic, which aligned with this study's six-week examination of *SportsCenter* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A preconstructed coding protocol aimed to identify relevant themes within a traditional news format. Thematic analysis is known for its flexibility where it routinely adapts to the goals of those studies with similar subject matter. For this study's purposes, this method's strength for analyzing large amounts of qualitative data made it a reliable approach to meet the challenge of compiling the results (Nowell et al., 2017).

Organizing themes in this study was paramount, which was assisted by first understanding the structured format that news programming follows to illuminate value in each story. Thematic analysis has guided similar media studies in which the research has centered on

discovering meaningful themes during television broadcasts. Altheide and Schneider (2013) cited multiple media studies which explored similar thematic themes by offering examples of subjects such as the Guatemala political campaigns, the United States war on terrorism and the Iran hostage crisis. All of these studies concentrated on pertinent trends in broadcast news, where themes were viewed as repeated patterns which were seen in hours of coded media coverage (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). These themes were defined as overall meanings, factors which represented the most dominant aspects from these respective messages.

In a medical qualitative study involving thematic analysis which highlighted nursing research, a theme was characterized as “an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations” (Desantis & Ugarriza, 2000 p.362). Altheide and Schneider (2013) discovered these themes are frequently correlated to the particular format to which journalists ascribe. This is relevant in this research as reporters are limited to a brief time in which they can communicate a story to their audiences, who in turn have to quickly process and recognize this messaging (Altheide & Schneider, 2013).

Thematic analysis has been applied in a sporting context that saw a study of how two boxers were portrayed by the sports media over the entirety of their respective careers (Bonhomme et al., 2018). The goal of this research was to break down themes involving the career trajectory of two well-known athletes from their humble beginnings to their zenith when they won titles. Using thematic analysis, the researchers discovered five themes from weathering early hardships to entry into their sport to their amateur experiences to when they graduated to the professional ranks and finally when both captured a world title (Bonhomme et al, 2018).

This method has assisted studies involving social media and the news gathering dynamic. Ferrucci (2016) examined a large sample of tweets from MSM journalists regarding former

Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice's domestic violence case and put them into a variety of categories to specifically determine the motivations behind the media's coverage of Rice's much-publicized scandal (Ferrucci, 2016). The method in this study concluded the categories for these journalists were (1) to make people laugh, (2) to perform journalistic duties, and (3) to build their own individual brand (Ferrucci, 2016). Employing similar methodology, this thesis explored the influence of the athletes' social media use on *SportsCenter* where the research defined how this MSM outlet responded to them during an extended period. In this study, the themes were gathered to highlight the overriding meaning of a collection of social media posts originating from athletes, sports personalities, and outside contributors that included all supporting factions such as fans and idle followers on social media.

Data Collection

Using thematic analysis, this research implemented a coding scheme which has garnered desired results in similar media studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data in this research was gathered and then broken down after instituting a series of phases in which relevant themes were discovered and ultimately deemed useful. This coding process aimed to reach the goals of this study which were to narrow down the collective social media messaging from 30 hours of *SportsCenter* programming into a group of final categories which would give this research its desired results. of the following coding process was used in this study.

Transcribed data from each 6 p.m. weekday *SportsCenter* which included 30 hours of programming over a six-week span. This included every social media post which aired. This content was further organized into its individual context from where it was presented in the show to how the ESPN anchors delivered it on the air. The delivery of these stories could be the lead

script, how it was teased, voiced over and even included coded banter between the two anchors and field reporters when relevant.

Generated initial codes: Once the shows were transcribed, the research categorized content into preliminary codes which showcased both the context, the importance and ultimately the positioning of this messaging in *SportsCenter's* rundown. Each *SportsCenter* coded tracked the number of stories, online content and the major takeaways daily those social media posts provided.

Reviewed themes: Thematic analysis emphasizes the constant reviewing of data to ensure the coding process has placed the results in the proper categories. This study instilled this step in the research to insure a complete evaluation.

Defined and named themes: The final phase allowed the research to be entered into a critical evaluation and ultimately placed into its proper category and context. This step took into account the ultimate designation of the collection of social media posts and then placed them into proper categories based on how they impacted *SportsCenter*.

After completing this process, the research narrowed down the analysis to four final categories for the athletes' posts: lead stories, breaking news, supportive content and self-promotion. These categories are constitutive to the broadcast news format that emphasizes organizing principles and assesses value to a story's importance.

Lead stories: These stories were social media posts which represented the lead story in *SportsCenter*. This messaging changed the direction of the show by its exclusivity and importance. These stories are defined by the sporting world's biggest names making announcements on their respective platforms which demand top attention from the gatekeepers of *SportsCenter*. This messaging illustrated the ultimate power these athletes possess in

releasing this relevant content first on their platforms, and having ESPN follow on its programming.

Breaking news: These stories broke new ground in a number of ways. It could be major news developments or minor ones, but they were social media posts in which athletes delivered exclusive content regarding a wealth of different topics. The difference between this category and lead stories is the nature of the content as breaking news would be exclusive yet isn't always as impactful as messaging which merits a story which leads *SportsCenter*. These posts changed *SportsCenter's* rundown as it presented new content which didn't lead the show but gave the viewer a story, they couldn't get from anywhere else but the athletes' online platforms.

Supportive: These stories remain exclusive but serve in a complementary fashion. *SportsCenter* aired these social media posts from athletes but often the sources came from the sports figures' family or fanbase. This content included trending topics on a wealth of different subjects. The coding process concluded this category happens most often. While this content is complementary to stories the ESPN gatekeepers already had in their rundowns, it remained exclusive content *SportsCenter* wouldn't have been able to generate on its own.

Self-promotion: This content was created not from the athletes messaging but by ESPN's own staff which served to promote a wide spectrum of stories already in the rundown. The airing of these posts shows the increased value of social media in not only breaking and supporting news, but in this case to complement the ESPN brand on a daily basis. These posts added clarity to a story already slotted in a *SportsCenter* rundown. This content originated from a variety of contexts in terms of social media posts or videos from the network's beat reporters, analysts or studio anchors.

The goal of this research was to explore the growing influence of athletes' messaging and how it has impacted the current gatekeeping process. The research investigated the priority *SportsCenter* placed on these posts. Data collection through thematic analysis allowed this study to specifically analyze how the posts were used, how the ESPN anchors introduced them and in which specific context they read these posts over the air. Finally, this method confirmed the different factors which surrounded each post's impact such as insight into the post-production elements which added more depth to this study's results.

The six-week time period in this study was crucial for a few reasons. It portrayed a more realistic environment in terms of sports media coverage as it concluded before COVID-19 shuttered global sport on Friday March 13, 2020. This sample was also a representative look at the sporting world as the concentrated time frame started in late January and wrapped up in early March, which encompassed every major sport along with college football and basketball.

Thematic analysis was relevant to this study as it uncovered underlying meanings embedded within a text which for the purposes of this research would be the daily dialogue and presentation of the athletes' messaging on *SportsCenter* (Altheide & Schneider, 2013).

RESULTS

The results answered both research questions, in terms of how the athletes' content was used on *SportsCenter* and how the stories were positioned. The research found the athletes' messaging impacted *SportsCenter* every day in the concentrated six-week period with the exception of three of the 30 days: February 25, March 2, and March 6. It took until week five of this six-week study to have a day when *SportsCenter* aired a show without any online messaging.

Coding of *SportsCenter* revealed the shows averaged 27.5 stories a day. Stories were defined as those which ran independently and didn't include any content which promoted ESPN's programming. Across the 30 episodes, social media content averaged just over two stories per sportscast. While this accounts for a little more than 7% of the total story count there were several examples which illustrate the potential of this phenomenon moving forward.

The highest total for social media stories occurred on February 18, 2020 where *SportsCenter* aired 31 stories but seven were from the athletes' messaging. On February 11, 2020 *SportsCenter* aired 28 stories and six were from social media posts. All of these posts originated solely from Twitter and Instagram platforms.

This study answered the first research question of how the athlete's social media content was used in *SportsCenter* by narrowing it into four story categories: lead stories, breaking news, supportive and self-promotion. After coding 30 hours of *SportsCenter*, the research's results delivered a distinction in this study as it found the athletes' posts both led and complemented the content. The study's findings were revealing as the athletes' posts routinely made an impact on

SportsCenter. Here is a breakdown of the results in this study which specifically answered both research questions regarding how the content was used and how the stories were positioned:

Lead Stories

The research found social media posts from athletes or about these sports personalities aired on *SportsCenter* five of the six weeks and 17% of this study's concentrated period. The tone of the five lead stories aired from this content ranged from NBA drama to NFL player responses to controversial content. For example, on February 11, *SportsCenter* led with NBA star Joel Embiid's tweets which found him ranting on the state of his team and play. Anchor Kevin Negandhi opened the show with "Joel Embiid had some fun last night on social media as the good people of Philly, they were a little stressed out" (ESPN, 2020, February 11). The Embiid story led *SportsCenter* and was mentioned all throughout the broadcast as well as a few minutes later in a segment with ESPN basketball analyst Tim Legler. On the Embiid drama, Legler said, "A whole lot of stuff that is disturbing for them (the Philadelphia 76ers) to accomplish their goals and a lot of it has to do with Joel Embiid as to the things he's done and said" (ESPN, 2020, February 11). It wasn't the things Embiid said, it was what he tweeted which took over this edition of *SportsCenter* where later in the broadcast the sportscast spent nearly two more minutes with a deep examination of Embiid's tweets. Anchor Sage Steele analyzed it for over two minutes over a pair of full-page graphics where Embiid expressed that "you either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain" (ESPN, 2020, February 11). Steele then tossed to NBA reporter Tim Bontemps where the first question was regarding Embiid's messaging, "NBA reporter Tim Bontemps covers the 76ers and is joining us now on *SportsCenter*, Tim we've seen this before but what is the Sixers reaction to Embiid's latest social media maneuver?" (ESPN, 2020, February 11). Bontemps took the Embiid story to the Sixers

getting reaction from head coach Brett Brown who said “It’s Joel you know, is it ideal? Maybe not” (ESPN, 2020, February 11). Bontemps than wrapped up his report and threw it back to Steele who said, “Always drama with Embiid and the Sixers so far this season” (ESPN, 2020, February 11).

Tuesday February 18, 2020 was the most impactful day of the three weeks researched where the athletes’ messaging provided the lead story involving one of the league’s top players for *SportsCenter*. This time it was Saints quarterback Drew Brees, who announced he would be returning for his 20th NFL season in an Instagram post. Brees’ status as the NFL’s all-time passing leader merited positioning this as lead content. Anchor Keith Olbermann led the show by sarcastically saying on air, “On behalf of middle aged men everywhere, thank you Drew Brees for the Instagram post that says I look forward to the grind, for the reward at the end will be worth it, let’s make another run at it” (ESPN, 2020, February 18). Olbermann continued on the Brees story while making another social media reference from the non-retirement Instagram post, “The news is unofficial of course there’s no contract and Teddy Bridgewater and Taysom Hill might delete their Instagram accounts,” making refence to the Saints two back-up quarterbacks who would have fought for Brees’ job had he not returned (ESPN, 2020, February 18).

In this research’s six weeks of coding *SportsCenter*, the athletes’ posts would often highlight the biggest stories especially in the NFL where if it wasn’t Drew Brees’ return it was an update on another marquee name in Tom Brady. The New England Patriots quarterback was about to become a free agent where online content surrounding him led the show on March 4, 2020. *SportsCenter* devoted :45 seconds to an Instagram video posted by UFC President Dana White who attempted to convince Brady to come play for his hometown Las Vegas Raiders. In

the video, *SportsCenter* devoted a portion of what White said “Now first of all, I’m a Boston guy through and through, I want you to go the Patriots but let me make my last pitch. Las Vegas would love to have you here at the Raiders” (SINOW, 2020). Coming out of the lengthy airing of the post *SportsCenter* anchor Mike Greenburg asked ESPN’s NFL Insider Jeff Darlington, “Now what are we supposed to make out of that?” (ESPN,2020, March 4). The biggest stories in the NFL routinely in this research were the content delivered by the athletes’ social media posts.

Breaking News Category

It was one thing for the athletes to have their content routinely lead *SportsCenter* in this study, but in addition to impacting the top stories, the research discovered an additional twelve more examples of these athletes’ posts which were deemed breaking news. The stories were often the first time *SportsCenter* heard from athletes on a controversial topic such as Reds pitcher Trevor Bauer often ranting on his Twitter account to how he differed with Major League Baseball commissioner Rob Manfred on a number of issues whether it was format changes for the playoffs or how he handled the Astros scandal (ESPN,2020 February 11).

The breaking news component from this messaging ranged from Carmelo Anthony posting on January 31, 2020 that the late Kobe Bryant had planned on seeing his game against the Lakers, to NBA star Andre Drummond providing the first reaction of his trade from Detroit to Cleveland the morning after on February 6, to fellow NBA star Ja Morant calling out Andre Iguodala and starting a twitter feud with Steph Curry which took minutes of time on *SportsCenter* and was featured again days later within a story done by ESPN’s NBA Reporter Rachel Nichols. This story contained nearly a minute devoted to the social media back and forth between the two NBA stars (ESPN, 2020, February 18). This on-air replaying of athletes’ messaging over multiple stories wasn’t just an isolated case as the research found it was a

notable trend in this study's results, a pattern which further highlighted the importance of this phenomenon.

Breaking news from these sources came primarily from Twitter but also originated from the relatives of these athletes. In NASCAR, after Ryan Newman was involved in a near fatal wreck on the final lap of the Daytona 500, Newman's wife posted a video of her husband a few days later walking out of the hospital with their two daughters. (ESPN, 2020, February 19). After it aired during *SportsCenter*, ESPN's NASCAR reporter Ryan McGee preceded to refer to Newman's wife's post in his live shot from Daytona where he relayed his own on-air story his wife shared with him after seeing the social media post, "Let me get this straight, you did live shots out in front of that hospital for two days and he just walked out the door," McGee recalled during his live shot on *SportsCenter*. It was another example of the power of this emerging phenomenon. These posts not only broke news but repeatedly and routinely are mentioned during *SportsCenter*.

Supportive Category

While the athletes' messaging proved to create news in several different sports and from a variety of contexts, their biggest impact was in the complementary roles it delivered ESPN's gatekeepers. These posts added exclusive depth to several stories *SportsCenter* already had deemed newsworthy.

A revealing finding in the research was these posts would sometimes represent all of the reaction in several *SportsCenter* stories. No on-camera interviews, no published statements from players or coaches, these stories just featured social media posts from athletes. For example, in covering Ryan Newman's last lap wreck at the Daytona 500, McGee didn't use any on-camera sound. The reaction in his story came from full page graphics which featured tweets on Newman

from driver Ricky Stenhouse Jr. President Trump and Newman's alma mater Purdue (ESPN, 2020, February 18).

Overall the research noted 21 different examples of *SportsCenter* using online content to complement stories they already planned to air. This was often seen during the aftermath of the death of Kobe Bryant where tweets from NBA players were prevalent. *SportsCenter* aired messaging from Los Angeles Lakers forward Anthony Davis, a tribute by the Brooklyn Nets Spencer Dinwiddie where he chose the number 26 which combined the numbers of Kobe and his late daughter along with the first reaction heard on Kobe's death from LeBron James. James's lengthy Instagram post was read in its entirety which took over a minute's worth of airtime on *SportsCenter* (ESPN, 2020, January 28)

ESPN doesn't just air posts from LeBron James on basketball, the network often solicits the opinions of the most popular American athlete on social media regarding a variety of topics. During *SportsCenter* on February 18, 2020 the network produced a graphic with the title "The King Weighs in," as James tweeted his opinion on the Houston Astros who had just been penalized by Major League Baseball in a sign stealing scandal just a few seasons removed from a World Series title. ESPN again respected James' opinion enough to spend nearly a minute on his tweet regarding the Astros. After reading an introduction filled with an abbreviated history of MLB scandals, *SportsCenter* anchor Keith Olbermann made the transition to James' Astros posts by saying, "and now its jump sports, at 5:25 eastern LeBron tweeted" and went on to read James's lengthy tweet. (ESPN, 2020, February 18th). James wasn't happy with the Astros where a portion of his tweets consumed two full page graphics where he tweeted "Listen, I don't play baseball but I am in sports and I know if someone cheated me out of winning a title and I found out about it, I would be (expletive) irate (ESPN, 2020, February 18).

Self-Promotion

While the social media posts of these professional athletes led several *SportsCenters*, broke many news stories and supported a multitude of existing stories, social media was also a factor in ESPN's coverage from their own on-air personalities. This would include its field reporters, analysts and in-studio hosts. This six-week study discovered four poignant examples of this trend. *SportsCenter* on February 13, 2020 devoted over a minute to a social media video post from analyst Stephen A. Smith which saw him making a three pointer before his live shot during the NBA's All-Star Weekend. Anchor Sage Steele tossed to Smith live saying "You tweeted some good stuff from about an hour ago" (ESPN, 2020, February 13) Steele added over video of Smith's post which *SportsCenter* preceded to play seven times, "I saw you , you took the jacket off to do this and I think the caption was straight buckets, capital letters by Stephen A. Smith shooting the 3's" (ESPN, 2020, February 14). Steele added, "Why didn't you show the one's that you missed, you just showed the one you made?" (ESPN, 2020, February 14). This segment was teased beforehand and then continued after Smith's live shot where *SportsCenter* aired more video of Smith shooting as they went to break.

These self-promotion posts included tweets from the network's on-air talent including more reaction from what they had previously posted. ESPN play-by-play man Boog Sciambi had tweeted a lengthy reaction to the Astros scandal and *SportsCenter* brought him on air to discuss it with anchor Keith Olbermann leaving Olbermann to note during the segment, "I am reduced to reading Boog Sciambi tweets on television" (ESPN, 2020, February 18).

Discussion

The growing impact of athletes' messaging on MSM presents a variety of questions regarding how this dynamic will take shape moving forward. This section discusses how

gatekeeping theory has undergone change due to these gatecrashers, examines a working definition of gatecrasher and explores how their influence has grown due to other forces outside of the sports world. In addition, how decades of budget cuts have impacted journalism in the United States have allowed for potentially more content from these gatecrashers. Finally, this study outlined how both the parameters and pressure of social media could impact the gatecrashers' messaging as this phenomenon continues to take shape.

Shoemaker and Vos (2009) redefined gatekeeping theory after social media was launched and factored in the influence of the internet yet still claimed the gatekeepers remained the center of the news gathering process. This study recognized gatekeeping theory still maintains the majority of power regarding the media's disbursement of stories, yet this research also shows this theory continues to lose its traditional hold on MSM outlets as seen in the study's research done on ESPN's *SportsCenter*. The gatekeepers remain in control of what makes air but the results in this study show those stories are increasingly from online messaging.

ESPN calls themselves the worldwide leader, where they have been the top network for sports coverage for decades. Earnhardt (2015) concluded, "ESPN has changed the way people around the globe consume sports, the way we talk about sports, and influenced the way we think about the people who play these games" (Earnhardt, 2015 p 271). Five years later, ESPN remains dominant, but the results in this study suggest the gatekeeping dynamic has been altered. The athletes now realize what newfound power they possess and are increasingly taking full advantage. Some use it more than others, yet the results of this research highlight a trend involving the gatecrashers' long-term impact on the gatekeeping process. The findings in this study suggest the potential the gatecrashers' posts present is increasingly more meaningful

breaking news content for MSM. It's a growing phenomenon which has been predicted for decades by noted media experts.

This study examined how Marshall McLuhan forecasted that one day a new and innovative media would incite a culture change and redirect the way traditional gatekeepers would approach their daily news gathering process (Taylor, 1999). McLuhan received the most notoriety for crafting his medium is the message mantra which proposed the characteristics of the media, not the content delivered by the media is what affects the audience the most (Levine & McLuhan, 1964). McLuhan's unique insight proved to be prophetic, but it never factored in those characteristics may ultimately be shared by impactful social media posts from professional athletes which would transform traditional gatekeeping practices.

McLuhan's insight was ahead of its time as was the foresight of Hebert Gans regarding the future of gatekeeping theory. His two-tiered model, while not predicting specifically the gatecrasher element, did foresee a complementary media component challenging the MSM which would offer multiple perspectives of both current and breaking news content. This research illustrated that both McLuhan and Gans were on the right track. In this deep evaluation of *SportsCenter*, the research showed the gatecrashers are the new and innovative media and clearly represent the second-tier in the model Gans envisioned (Gans, 1983).

For the purposes of this research, it's important to define the term gatecrasher. This study concluded athletes' posts during a six-week span of *SportsCenter* influenced content the large majority of the period researched, specifically 27 of the 30 days. The research found during that time while only 7% of the stories were from these social media posts, the majority of those stories which aired was deemed meaningful. Even in a complementary fashion, the messaging from these athletes provided meaning as this study cited multiple examples of ESPN airing a

story where no on-camera sound was included, just social media posts from athletes. The results were meaningful as seen by the many lead stories and breaking news content driven from the gatecrashers' messaging. These social media posts created stories which wouldn't have otherwise had been at the gatekeeper's disposal. Thus, for the purposes here, the gatecrasher is defined as someone who alters the traditional gatekeeping process by providing meaningful content the MSM couldn't otherwise attain. In this case it was ESPN's *SportsCenter* who leaned on the gatecrashers for stories that were relevant. In addition, this content by the gatecrashers altered the flow of *SportsCenter's* rundowns which for years was solely controlled by traditional gatekeeping practices.

An important example of how the gatecrashers' content was meaningful was seen in how it was used repeatedly in this study of *SportsCenter*. The gatecrashers' posts were not only relevant, it also had the penchant to be used over multiple segments of *SportsCenter* shows. For example, the aforementioned *SportsCenter* where NBA star Joel Embiid's tweets led and were mentioned all throughout the sportscast showed the true impact of this content. On February 11, 2020, Embiid's tweets which led *SportsCenter* were also mentioned in two different segments both in-studio with analyst Tim Legler and later on scene from the network's NBA reporter Tim Bontemps. In addition, these social media posts by Embiid were teased multiple times in the broadcast, complemented by two full page graphics and solicited further reaction from Embiid's Philadelphia head coach Brett Brown. Nearly four minutes of coverage was devoted to a few cryptic tweets from an NBA player illustrate how athletes-as-gatecrashers can impact gatekeeping content and are sometimes so relevant to MSM, they are used multiple times. A trend the research cited repeatedly in this six-week study of *SportsCenter*.

The most revealing example of this gatecrashing trend of seeing this messaging being spread out over a show was in *SportsCenter*'s coverage of the NFL's Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). This example was on display for weeks on *SportsCenter*. The importance of the gatecrashers in this instance was seen in a relevant three-day period, where there wasn't any on-camera sound. The only reaction came from social media posts from several NFL players where a trend quickly developed.

Beginning with its coverage on Wednesday, February 20th, 2020 when the CBA proposal went public, ESPN didn't use on-camera sound from its vast array of resources, instead, they immediately went to Twitter for reaction. *SportsCenter* anchor Kevin Negandhi led the show by saying, "Last night after the owners approved the new CBA, Texans star JJ Watt tweeted out" (ESPN, 2020, February 20th) then read his tweets verbatim over full screen graphics with tweets from both Houston defensive lineman JJ Watt who tweeted "Hard No on that proposed CBA" (Watt, 2020), followed by another full screen with a tweet from San Francisco cornerback Richard Sherman who tweeted, "Please communicate with your team rep" (Sherman, 2020). Having two of the NFL's biggest faces headline *SportsCenter*'s CBA coverage reinforced McLuhan's ideals on the future of gatekeeping theory as Watt and Sherman provided pertinent messages from a different medium. These gatecrashers served the role in what McLuhan had referenced decades earlier by representing the characteristics of the media, not the content with their messaging. The characteristics of these players' messaging wasn't the traditional gatekeeping stories audiences have been accustomed to but were providing as McLuhan had predicted, an outside force which one day would affect the gatekeeping process (Levine and McLuhan, 1964). Those forces in this case were two of the NFL's biggest stars. This media

mindset is what the gatecrashers now bring to MSM and based on this study's research this messaging from the athletes has the potential to become more impactful for years to come.

Another 48 hours went by and the CBA was still a top story, yet no reaction on camera or with ESPN reporters from NFL players. The network continued to lean on several gatecrashers to fill the void. Wednesday February 26, 2020 the lead story on *SportsCenter* was the release of an Instagram video from Steelers center Maurkice Pouncey, who in an expletive-laced rant while driving his car, angrily called out those who supported the current CBA proposal. Pouncey delivered a stern message for the young players in the league who may be on the verge of supporting it. A portion of his video had Pouncey saying "If you want my vote the Pouncey twins (his twin brother Mike Pouncey plays for the Chargers) vote no. Any player, any one of our teams, if ya'll hurting fro rent money, if you want to know why we go through this lockout call us. Man, we have way more money than what they had back in the day, we ain't got to worry about that" (SA247LLC, 2020). Pouncey's social media video post passionately sent a message that many veteran players were sticking up for younger players in their opposition of the NFL's CBA proposal. The airing of this video post was just a part of nearly a minute's worth of coverage ESPN lead their show with, without any other on-camera interviews from their own fleet of reporters.

Pouncey's post dominated *SportsCenter* where a portion of his social media video was used in the opening tease where he said "if ya'll want my vote, the Pouncey twins vote no" (ESPN, 2020, February 26th). *SportsCenter* anchor Michael Eaves first words in the show were "that's a no from Pouncey." Later in *SportsCenter* co-anchor Sage Steele when introducing the Pouncey story remarked, "On social media there appears to be more players against the deal than are for it. For example, listen to Steelers center Maurkice Pouncey, he's adamant" (ESPN, 2020,

February 26th). There was no research backing Steele's statement. She was solely basing her on air comments on the social media posts from gatecrashers like Pouncey, JJ Watt and Richard Sherman.

After Pouncey's video, ESPN instead of any interviews ran full screen graphics with tweets from NFL players reacting to the CBA. Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson weighed in, "The @nba & @mlb are doing it right, players come first" (Wilson, 2020). That was just a part of Wilson's tweet which was aired on *SportsCenter* but was followed up by two graphics which highlighted a lengthy tweet from Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who released a formal statement on Twitter. Here was a portion of what ESPN aired from Rodgers, "I voted no last night. My decision to vote NO is based off the conversations I have had with the men in my locker room that I'm tasked to represent" (Rodgers, 2020). After Rodgers' tweet, ESPN aired another graphic with a tweet from San Francisco cornerback Richard Sherman. It was the second time viewers saw a tweet from Sherman that week. Sherman, Rodgers, Wilson and Watt became the only spokesmen regarding this CBA story in the coming days and weeks. These repeated contributions positioned these athletes as gatecrashers as collectively the gatekeepers enabled them to take over this story.

In examining the semiotics of this study, ESPN would use images of the players whom they had aired tweets when they introduced the CBA story. *SportsCenter's* preceding coverage only included images of Watt, Sherman, Wilson and Rodgers and did so multiple times in the next week of this research. In addition to images, ESPN when dealing with the CBA story would also reference the same aforementioned gatecrashers multiple times when reporting on the CBA story. For example, *SportsCenter* anchor Kevin Negandhi was anchoring the network's coverage from the NFL Combine and on February 27, 2020 said on the air "Many of the big

names and stars like Aaron Rodgers have spoken out against the proposed deal on social media” (ESPN, 2020, February 27). For context, it was interesting after this reference, Negandhi then introduced a story with the first sound from someone outside of this select group all week as he threw to the Executive Director of the NFL’s player’s association DeMaurice Smith, who was asked by the media gathering at the combine specifically about the social media posts. The gatecrashers infiltrated the gatekeeping process for days and this trend was apparent at the NFL Combine in Indianapolis as these social media posts represented the only messaging from any player *SportsCenter* would air. In fact, in this six-week study the only players ESPN interviewed on camera were union player representatives Nate Solder from the New York Giants and the Chicago Bears’ Chase Daniel. Each sound bite aired once and was never repeated unlike the gatecrashing social media posts and images which were aired repeatedly all week.

The next day and for the third straight show on Friday February 28,2020, Negandhi when presenting a story on the CBA, made reference to only the players whom ESPN had aired tweets saying “Several prominent players like Russell Wilson and Aaron Rodgers have already said they will vote “no” on the proposed deal” (ESPN, 2020, February 28). This was one of two references Negandhi would make regarding gatecrashers Wilson and Rodgers in that *SportsCenter*.

The CBA story involving these social media posts accounted for several minutes of programming over this three-day span, which in this study showed how the gatecrashers could potentially dictate a particular story. To provide perspective, *SportsCenter* runs an hour but includes four commercial breaks which all exceed four minutes in length. The average *SportsCenter* has 17.5 minutes of commercials leaving just over 42 minutes of programming. This is relevant as when stories like the CBA account for multiple minutes and are repeated

throughout a multitude of segments, this repetition illustrates the gatecrashers' relevancy on *SportsCenter*. When ESPN airs a video for nearly a minute, such as Pouncey's post or reads multiple graphics over a Rodgers tweet and then add several references to these posts, the gatecrashers become increasingly a larger part of the total time on *SportsCenter*.

On Tuesday March 3, 2020 this study discovered another *SportsCenter* lead story surrounding gatecrashing content from of a different source. It didn't originate from a player, coach or sports personality, it was derived from a fan video posted on Twitter which went viral and ultimately provided the most impactful content regarding the treatment of director Spike Lee at a New York Knicks game in Madison Square Garden (MSG). Lee, a longtime Knicks season ticket holder was told by MSG security that he couldn't use his normal entrance to get to his seats and he became irate. Unlike the CBA story, this didn't linger for weeks, but was another example of gatecrasher content which was spread over an entire segment of *SportsCenter*. This *SportsCenter* led with the Spike Lee story and devoted its first seven minutes of the show to it. The seven minutes included an on-camera interview with Lee from ESPN's "*First Take*" morning show earlier in the day followed by a statement from the Knicks but it was the social media video which drove this story and offered the gatekeepers its most meaningful content. The video led *SportsCenter* where you heard Lee yell at Madison Square Garden security guards "no one told me" four times and then added "I'm staying here" (BroTalkLivePod, 2020). *SportsCenter* ran :15 seconds of the video to lead the show, followed by :15 more seconds of anchor Kevin Negandhi reading over the video and finally ESPN reporter Malika Andrews used the video to begin her report on Spike Lee (ESPN, 2020, March 3)

SportsCenter's coverage of Spike Lee's story was highlighted by the social media video but also featured supporting sound from another gatecrasher. It was complemented with reaction

from NBA Hall of Famer and current broadcaster Reggie Miller. Miller, who has had legendary encounters with Spike Lee over the years during his playing days at MSG sent out a reactionary yet humorous tweet “OOOHHHHH how the MIGHTY have fallen....This wouldn’t happen at Bankers Life Fieldhouse (Pacers Arena in Indianapolis), maybe finally time to (in reference to Spike) switch Your allegiance (smile emoji)” (Miller, 2020). The gatecrashers represented the lead story from top to bottom, a noticeable trend in this research.

This story further emphasizes the definition of a gatecrasher as a person who provides meaningful content directly on MSM platforms. This study also defines gatecrashing as a mechanism that social media offers whether it’s first-hand or in the case of the Spike Lee story on *SportsCenter* from a second-hand source. The messaging of the NFL’s marquee stars along with the NBA stories on Spike Lee and Joel Embiid not only led *SportsCenter*’s coverage but controlled the narrative for the majority of the week, a relevant sign this gatecrashing dynamic is an emerging force in MSM.

While this study discovered how athletes have impacted the gatekeeping process, the potential of this trend from a macro perspective has been seen in the social media messaging from former President Donald Trump. His actions on social media have served as an example for many how taking over your messaging can make you the ultimate gatecrasher as seen in the results in both his bid for the presidency and his subsequent four years in office (Bauder, 2020). Trump took over the MSM and personified this study’s definition of a gatecrasher as he provided meaningful content to gatekeepers on a daily basis while in office (Bauder, 2020). Trump revolutionized the gatekeeping process where outlets routinely had to air his posts despite his messaging often being polarizing and factually incorrect. Rattner (2021) looked into the former president’s most popular tweets over his four years in office and found the majority of them were

negative and inaccurate in nature. According to (Rattner, 2021) of Trump's 10 most popular tweets, four represented incorrect assertions of the 2020 election results and of his 100 most popular posts, 36 portrayed false statements concerning the election. Despite the controversial messages sent, MSM allowed this presidential gatecrasher to invade their rundowns on a consistent basis where like the gatecrashers in this research, Trump's tweets would not only often lead newscasts but would be discussed in several segments throughout a variety of different newscasts.

While Trump's gatecrashing ways ultimately had the former president permanently banned from Twitter following the riots on Capitol Hill in January of 2021, his legacy showed many how if given the power, it's possible to severely effect the gatekeeping processes through social media posts. This was seen in a study by Hornsey and Finlayson (2020) which concluded Trump's messaging in office effected his base in-regards-to the potential of the COVID-19 vaccine. Trump was the first president in the history of United States to actively take a stance against a vaccination where his social media posts had an impact in-regards-to the public's view on how safe and efficient the vaccine would be. Hornsey and Finlayson (2020) study showed it had more of an impact on Trump's base than those who oppose the president's views but it reenforces the major theme of this study in how his messaging impacted the traditional news gathering processes. This study has referenced how gatekeepers routinely aired Trump's tweets while knowing they were often false and prone to alienating many in their audience. The former president left office and Twitter with 88 million followers and around 16,000 now-deleted tweets as President of the United States (Hornsey and Finlayson, 2020). Trump's impact was evident as a gatecrasher, where he showed the extreme potential of how the gatekeeping process can be transformed.

Future Implications

This study has outlined the impact of the gatecrashers in terms of traditional gatekeeping practices, but when considering the future of this dynamic, it's important to take a deeper dive into the issues which could heighten this trend in the next several years. Those issues include not only the increased opportunities social media has afforded the athletes to present their messaging but factors such as the financial decline of the media, which has resulted in a lower quality of journalism. In addition, it's relevant to assess the potential future effects of miscommunication and overexposure in the gatecrashers' messaging.

The changes in gatekeeping theory have coincided with the disintegration of the media from a financial standpoint, which has led to a decline in terms of the quality of overall media coverage. A factor this study traced back to the 1970's in Edward Epstein's Theory (Epstein, 1975). Like McLuhan and Gans, Epstein forecasted a trend which proved to be accurate in how the continued budget cuts would lead to a decline in the quality of journalism which ultimately would have long term implications on the gatekeeping process. While the Epstein Theory saw these financial struggles result in outlets having broadcast journalists report on stories which were easier to cover, the recent trend is more disturbing in terms of both the numbers and the overall impact.

For this study's purposes you can look at how even though ESPN has been considered the gold standard in sports broadcasting, it hasn't been immune to financial burdens. Due to the changing landscape of cable and the infiltration of streaming services, ESPN has lost nearly 20 million cable subscribers from 2013-2020 (Strauss, 2020). The effects of this lost revenue were seen in ESPN's massive cutbacks beginning in 2015 where they laid off 300 employees, followed by 200 more in 2017 and several others in the subsequent years. The direct impact of

these cutbacks has been the loss of several veteran journalists and producers, where the on-air product has suffered. The result has been replacing these proven journalists with those who don't exhibit the same experience level.

Deitsch (2017) noted the effects of these ESPN layoffs saying the network instituted new requirements for the present editorial staff to undergo extensive social media training and on his *Sports Illustrated* media podcast brought in *Boston Globe* media reporter Chad Finn who viewed the loss of so many tenured journalists as a problem for these established gatekeepers, " These were the institutional knowledge people that got let go, the behind the scenes people, the ones on the depth chart who made the front-facing people look as good as they do. The quality and depth of their work isn't going to be the same as it was three plus years ago when these layoffs started hitting" Finn said (as cited in Deitsch, para 6, 2017). The quality of *SportsCenter* has been on the decline for years and as a result the product has suffered, but ESPN isn't the only entity to lose both manpower and subsequently talent from its newsroom. In a comprehensive study of American newspapers, the Pew Research Center researched the trend of decreased staffing over the past decade (Grieco, 2020). The layoffs in the newspaper industry have been staggering where the number of employees in United States' newsrooms dropped a substantial 51% from 2008 to 2019 where the sum total went from 71,000 working in newsrooms to 35,000 (Grieco, 2020).

In 2008 overall newsrooms averaged roughly 114,000 employees which included a staff of reporters, editors, photographers and videographers. This Pew study factored in the five platforms which produce news: newspapers, radio, television and cable. By 2019, after several nationwide budget cuts in the United States, the newsrooms averaged 88,000. It was a loss of 27,000 jobs in an 11-year span (Grieco, 2020).

This growing pattern of increased layoffs leading to a decreased level of experience in terms of on-air performance and journalistic standards just adds to the evolving gatecrasher dynamic. In this study, the research found the gatekeepers still maintain the majority of the responsibility in delivering news to its collective audience, but the gatecrasher dynamic has provided added content which has become more attractive to newsrooms that are increasingly less experienced and fiscally challenged. With the media having less manpower and athletes seeing they have more avenues in getting their messaging out on their own without talking to the traditional gatekeepers, there is potential for this trend to evolve in the coming years.

This study's research showed that despite ESPN having an eight-year TV deal with the NFL where the network pays \$1.9 billion per season and possesses a fleet of veteran reporters, when news of the CBA deal broke, *SportsCenter* still failed to deliver its audience any on camera interviews, in favor of social media posts from gatecrashers (Adgate, 2020). As a veteran broadcast journalist having worked at every level from local to regional to national sports outlets, I have seen the access of the modern athlete deteriorate in recent years. Before the launch of social media, it was much easier to talk to players and coaches one on one, especially during the offseason. During these months, with the absence of the teams' or schools' often protective public relations staffs not providing potential constraints, for years reporters were able to set up interviews with players at their convenience, get quality access and ultimately develop better relationships. In the social media era, sports personalities have their own messaging, which now often precludes these personalities from talking to the media as they now no longer have the need. While social media has limited access to athletes in the online era, MSM due to budget cutbacks and inexperience also have relied more on this messaging, a trend which will be interesting to watch moving forward. The access is there but a question will be whether the

media will resist pursuing it because it's easier to just air posts from the athletes' messaging? This could be a disturbing pattern as this phenomenon has the great potential of further taking over shows like *SportsCenter* if the sports media continues to disengage while the athletes continue to remove themselves from the MSM.

This gatecrashing phenomenon has affected the audience in that gatekeepers have lost their traditional influence, but it also should be noted these athletes are messaging without an editor crafting their social media posts. This potential communication breakdown provides a disconnect for their target audience (Ma, 2018). The lack of social media training for many athletes hurts the messaging, yet the overall relationship between sports personalities and the media has altered the news gathering process significantly too (DiMengo, 2019). A report by national outlet, *Bleacher Report* (DiMengo, 2019) outlined how social media has ruined sports coverage. The excessive number of athlete-on-athlete arguments on social media and the pressing need to go viral were mentioned, but the factors of overexposure is also paramount as this phenomenon evolves. Before social media, sports fans were craving more from its athletes, now often these potential gatecrashers give fans more than they want to know where the content is deemed both immaterial and potentially harmful to the athlete (Wilson, 2018). These athletes, like politicians and other celebrities are held to a higher standard but often are still careless about their respective messaging. Controversial biker Lance Armstrong once accidentally tweeted his phone number, former NFL star Ray Rice bragged about a police officer waving a ticket for an autograph while former NFL player Davone Bess tweeted a nude picture and a shot of marijuana on his coffee table (Satterfield, 2016). These athletes can be reckless as Forrester (2018) found their social media posts effect their careers where many are seen sending out social media posts just hours before they perform.

This study's working definition of gatecrashing surrounds the impact of meaningful content. Meaningful messaging athletes send out on their collective platforms which ESPN's *SportsCenter* aired. The research illustrated that some athletes are more effective in their gatecrashing practices while others chose to be more responsible and protective of their collective brand. Given the current state of the media in the United States and the growing influence of social media, the opportunities for future gatecrashers to infiltrate the gatekeeping process are increasing.

Anecdotal Carryover

The gatecrashing trend wasn't deterred during the recent COVID-19 pandemic where even in the absence of live sporting events this phenomenon remained on full display especially among its biggest stories. When New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees told *Yahoo Finance* that he would never agree with any player disrespecting the flag during the National Anthem, it resulted in a social media firestorm where several Saints teammates and fellow NFL players lashed out against one of the most popular players in the league (Cwik,2020).

The moment the story broke, the majority of the reaction on *SportsCenter* came via the social media posts from these players and Brees himself. On June 4, 2020 *SportsCenter* led with sound from Brees' interview with *Yahoo Finance* and immediately after ESPN anchor Sage Steele read four full page graphics full of quotes from Brees' lengthy apology on Instagram.

No press conference or Zoom interviews with an ESPN reporter, instead the content came verbatim from Brees' social media posts, which included lengthy comments such as "I am sick about the way my comments were perceived yesterday, but I will take full responsibility and accountability. I recognize that I should do less talking and more listening" (Brees, 2020).

To further illustrate the power of the gatecrashers' impact on relevant stories such as these, after the lengthy coverage of Brees' social media posts, *SportsCenter* built another graphic with the full tweet from Saints wide receiver Michael Thomas who tweeted, "One of my brothers made a public statement yesterday that I disagreed with. He apologized and I accept it because that's what we are taught to do as Christians. Now back to the movement! #GeorgeFloyd" (Thomas, 2020).

Thomas was one of many supporting tweets *SportsCenter* aired to fill its content for this story and is another example of how the message is being more and more controlled by the gatecrashers and less by the traditional gatekeepers.

Study Limitations

Often the key in thematic analysis is discovering what is absent and for the purposes in this study it would have been nice to have included both more participants in the research and more perspective. This study would have liked to have included more news outlets especially at the regional and local level as both tend to lean on the gatecrashers in different ways.

SportsCenter was a relevant barometer as even decades after their launch, they remain the only consistent sports show on the air especially during that coveted 6 pm time slot. Gauging news at that prime hour was ideal for this study's purposes because it allowed for both the news of the day and a chance to get reaction from all the top stories over the past 24 hours. To provide added perspective, future studies could include interviews from athletes who are involved in the sport in both the current climate yet played when social media wasn't a factor. It would also be interesting to talk to those athletes who haven't experience any other time than the social media era. I would be interested to get more perspective from all parties on if they see this gatecrasher phenomenon as being good for athletes or having an adverse effect.

Directions for Future Research

The pattern of the gatekeepers sharing their news rundowns with the gatecrashers promises to only heighten in the future. Athletes in the social media era are only getting younger which means several have only lived in a world where they can control their message online. Future studies can witness how the growth of the gatekeepers will be able to spread more content on sportscasts but specifically away from lead stories and breaking news to what other kinds of posts the networks see as newsworthy. One of the stories not mentioned in the research was the airing of the #GIRLDAD trend, which was inspired by the death of Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gigi. ESPN ran a lengthy story about how the #GIRLDAD trend hit home with players and the public, many of whom aren't even interested in sports. The story wasn't covered by much video instead the majority of the content was represented by the many #GIRLDAD tweets and Instagram posts around the country. There are several ways this gatecrashing phenomenon will continue to make an impact. This was just another example.

Conclusion

The thematic analysis in this study revealed a series of categories which illustrated the growing impact of athletes as media gatecrashers. The research showed in six weeks of coding ESPN's *SportsCenter* that more than a third of the shows saw gatecrashers impacting *SportsCenter* through breaking news content. Athletes are seeing this trend and are realizing they can take control of their messages, whether it's announcing a return for another season, reacting to a controversy, or protesting a union vote, these gatecrashers aren't decreasingly talking to the media about these big stories. Their social media posts are doing the talking. This evolving communicative mindset is seen in a number of ways, even when the gatecrashers are messaging each other it's news to mainstream gatekeepers. LSU's Heisman Trophy quarterback Joe Burrow

was criticized at the 2020 NFL Combine for having small hands. Burrow met with the media during the week but saved his best line for social media tweeting “Considering Retirement after I was informed the football will be slipping out of my tiny hands. Please keep me in your thoughts” (Burrow, 2020). Reigning Super Bowl MVP Patrick Mahomes was one of many big names responding online by tweeting, “My small hands are doing alright so far...I believe in you (crying emoji)” (Mahomes, 2020). *SportsCenter* ran both tweets.

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