

Compared to bloggers, journalists go deeper to cover sports

July 20 2011

When sports stories become linked with other social and business issues, professional journalists tend to offer deeper and broader coverage than sports bloggers, according to Penn State researchers.

In a study of the way mainstream columnists and popular bloggers covered conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh's involvement in a partnership attempting to buy a professional football team, the researchers showed that journalists were more likely to include issues such as race and business in their columns, said Marie Hardin, associate director of the John Curley Center for [Sports Journalism](#).

"We look at this as something that is encouraging," said Hardin. "In the past, sports journalists tended to shy away from the cultural aspects of a story, but now, compared to bloggers, professional journalists seem much more willing to show that there's more to the story than what's on the field."

Hardin, working with Erin Ash, a graduate student in communications, examined approximately 100 columns and blog posts mentioning Limbaugh's membership in an [investment group](#) that was attempting to buy the St. Louis Rams in 2009. Limbaugh's participation in the group was controversial because of his conservative politics. He was also forced to resign in 2003 as an NFL commentator for [ESPN](#) after making racially charged comments about Donovan McNabb, a black quarterback who was then playing for the Philadelphia Eagles.

Hardin said they picked the Limbaugh story because the subject matter went beyond the confines of sports reporting.

"The Rush Limbaugh story was important because it went beyond sports," said Hardin. "It included cultural issues, like race, as well as political and business issues."

The researchers, who reported their findings in the current issue of *Newspaper Research Journal*, gathered columns from major newspapers, magazines and web sites, such as [USA Today](#), the New York Times and ESPN.com. They also selected posts from the top 25 general sports blogs and top 10 NFL blogs as ranked by The Sports Media Challenge, a firm that advises athletes and sports executives on media relations. The list of blogs included Deadspin and the Big Lead.

Journalists were significantly more likely to mention Limbaugh's past comments on race. They were also more likely to discuss the economics of professional football and the politics of team owners.

Hardin, an associate professor of journalism and associate dean for graduate and undergraduate education, said that the depth of coverage reflects the advantages professional journalists have over bloggers, including better training and more resources. Other research conducted by the center that compared blogs to other types of coverage has found similar results, Hardin said.

"Professionals have more time and better access to sources and background," said Hardin. "An amateur blogger working in their spare time just wouldn't have these types of resources."

Hardin also said the study reinforced the need for readers to use multiple sources. Blogs, while entertaining and often unconventional, cannot supplant more traditional forms of coverage.

"We would advise readers to get the big picture," said Hardin. "This study underscores the importance of getting information from multiple sources."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Compared to bloggers, journalists go deeper to cover sports (2011, July 20) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-07-bloggers-journalists-deeper-sports.html>

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