The juxtaposition of sport and communication: defining the field of sport communication

Paul M. Pedersen*, Pamela C. Laucella, Kimberly S. Miloch and Larry W. Fielding

Department of Kinesiology, Indiana University
1025 E. 7th St., HPER 112, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA
E-mail: ppederse@indiana.edu
E-mail: plaucell@indiana.edu
E-mail: kmiloch@indiana.edu
E-mail: lfieldin@indiana.edu
*Corresponding author

Abstract: Studying sport in the academia has been in existence for several decades. The educational pursuits in sport have been rooted in such disciplines as history, management, sociology, marketing, organisational behaviour, and law. Communication is another of these established academic disciplines upon which the study of sport has been juxtaposed. One way for the intersection of sport and communication – sport communication – to continue to grow as its own academic discipline is through defining the field itself. Therefore, this analysis proposes a unified definition for the academic study of sport communication and examines the unique and integrated elements involved. Such a definitional inquiry assists in the development of the disciplinary parameters and research possibilities of the field of sport communication.

Keywords: sport; communication; sport communication; process; theory; academia.

Biographical notes: Paul M. Pedersen, an Associate Professor of Sport Communication, received his PhD in Sport Management from Florida State University. Pedersen has authored or coauthored three books and published over 30 peer-reviewed articles in national or international academic journals such as the *Journal of Sport Management*, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* and *Journal of Sports Economics*. In addition to his authorship of over 400 non-refereed articles, he is on the editorial board of five national and international sport journals. Pedersen, a former sportswriter and sports business columnist, researches the activities of sport organisation personnel, specifically those associated with the print media.

Pamela C. Laucella, an Assistant Professor of Sport Communication and Sport Marketing at Indiana University, earned her PhD in Journalism and Mass Communication from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Laucella has given referred presentations at professional conferences in several disciplines and has published in and been a reviewer for peer-reviewed national and international journals and conferences. She has worked in journalism, communication, and public relations in sport, and has researched, published,

and presented on socio-cultural-historical issues in sport journalism and communication, focusing on media portrayals of race and gender. She also studies the media 'feeding frenzy' surrounding Division I college coaches and the journalist/source relationship between coaches and the media.

Kimberly S. Miloch, an Assistant Professor of Sport Communication and Sport Marketing at Indiana University, earned her PhD in Sport Management from Florida State University. Miloch has given more than 19 refereed presentations at professional conferences and published numerous peer-reviewed articles in national or international academic journals. Miloch serves as editorial review board member for three national sport journals and a national communication conference. She has worked in communications and marketing in professional sport. Her main research focus includes factors influencing sport consumption with a specific emphasis on public relations and service quality.

Lawrence W. Fielding is a Professor and Director of the Sport Marketing/Management Program in the Department of Kinesiology at Indiana University. He also served as the Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Kinesiology. He received his PhD from the University of Maryland in sport history in 1974. He has published more than 50 articles in sport history, sport management, and sport marketing. He has presented more than 75 papers at professional meetings. He has served on the editorial review boards for the *Journal of Sport History*, *Journal of Sport Management*, and the *Sport Marketing Quarterly*. He is a Research Fellow in the North American Society for Sport Management.

1   Introduction

Sport communication has progressed from a field primarily consisting of print sport journalism to a multi-faceted and multi-billion-dollar industry with significant potential for continued growth. The $4.48 billion television agreement that begins in 2007 between the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) and four US networks is only one of myriad examples that can be used to illustrate the growing significance of sport communication in the sport industry. The growth in sport communication has been witnessed around the globe. As Grainger and Andrews (2005) commented:

> "Given both the broad appeal of global sporting mega-events as well as regional interest in televised coverage of local teams and competitions, it is perhaps hardly surprising that sport has become a central component of the strategies of the global media." (p.4)

In an examination of mediated sport, Bernstein and Blain (2002) noted that, "sport and the media have become associated to such an extent that it is often difficult to discuss sport in modern society without acknowledging its relationship with media" (p.3). Although such a statement expresses the significance of sport and the media, the field of sport communication goes beyond this. The discipline of sport communication today is expansive as it encompasses everything from interpersonal relationships, public relations, and electronic media to advertising, theory, research, and emerging technologies. Its activities include a conversation between two front office professionals with Real Madrid and a live chat on the Frankfurt Galaxy's website to a podcast of Olympic highlights or the broadcast of the Super Bowl.

Recognising the growing and broad nature of sport communication, a need exists for a conceptual examination of the field. To appropriately evaluate and illustrate the facets and interrelated aspects of a discipline, sport scholars have often relied on conceptual frameworks (Pitts *et al.*, 1994; Van Leeuwen *et al.*, 2002; Westerbeek and Shilbury, 2003). Such examinations allow for the appropriate illustrations and definitions of a specific discipline and provide a foundation for the development of multiple areas of scholarly inquiry. They assist researchers in the identification of the 'big picture' while recognising the concepts and variables that impact the nature and scope of the discipline. A conceptual analysis of the field of sport communication should present the sport communication process and classify its distinct aspects presenting both micro and macro perspectives of the discipline. Therefore, the purpose of this analysis is to examine the nature and scope of sport communication and define its role within the study of sport. Specifically, this research codifies the definitional elements and presents a conceptual perspective of this emerging field.

2 Defining sport communication

Although the intersection of sport and communication has been examined for nearly a half-century, the juxtaposition of these two areas into an academic discipline is a recent phenomenon. Because of this relatively young existence, there is a need to define sport communication and its various components. As Costa (2005) explained in an analysis of sport management, "an exploration of who we are" is one of the, "pivotal realms of self-exploration for a young field that seeks to establish itself and its relevance" (p.118). Studying sport communication is more complicated than analysing the textual, production, and reception domains of the sport media.

There are many aspects beyond the sport media that constitute sport communication. These aspects – extrapolated from Burton (2002) and applied to the sport context – include such areas as sport communication institutions, production systems, conditions, and sport communication meanings. Sport communication institutions include entities that own and operate sport media or the departments of public and media relations in sport entities. Production systems include those activities that centre on developing the content and context of sport messages disseminated to mass and niche audiences. Conditions refer to the setting where sport communication takes place while sport communication meanings refer to the examination of sport audiences. All of these aspects can be found in the definitional examination of sport communication below. The analysis includes an evaluation of the sport communication process, the various communication channels and transfer of messages, the senders and receivers of messages, the language used to create symbolism and meaning of messages, and communication as interaction.

The communication process is quite complex and because of this complexity it is challenging to define (Battenfield, 2004). The same can be said of sport communication. A primal definition of sport communication denotes the discipline as an exchange of sport related and non-sport related information occurring through sport. However, to truly recognise the broad scope of the discipline, a more complex definition is most appropriate. Sport communication is a process by which people in sport, in a sport setting, or through a sport endeavour, share symbols as they create meaning through interaction. Like John Dewey, Robert Park and other Chicago School sociologists, who

viewed communication as "an active process of community creation and maintenance", (Carey, 1997, p.26), this definition stems from a cultural approach to examining communication. Although its foundation is in the definition of communication offered by Heath and Bryant (2000), by integrating every aspect of communication through sport and in sport, this definition clearly denotes the broad scope of the discipline. It encompasses interpersonal sport communication, group sport communication, mediated sport communication, and any other type of communicative activity in sport. This analysis proposes the following definition: sport communication is a process by which people in sport, in a sport setting, or through a sport endeavour, share symbols as they create meaning through interaction. This definition contains five unique elements, each of which is detailed below.

2.1   "Sport communication is a process…

The definition's foundation relies on mass communication theory, which provides insight into the study of sport communication and specifically into its process. A theoretical definition needs to include more than, "theory as abstract ideas and theory as predictable findings" (Chaffee, 1996, p.15) in order to capture the complexity of the term and its fundamental processes. Theory also includes concept explication, which links and connects abstract theory with a more positivist view of knowledge and replicable results. Empirical theory elucidates interrelationships between independent and dependent variables at the conceptual level, exposition of concepts and definitions, and the ensuing findings at the operational level. Therefore, the whole process – from the original idea to the hypotheses, literature review, and research – comprises theorising and fosters intellectually rigorous and thought-provoking research (Chaffee, 1996).

In sport communication, the theorising process includes both the academic field of research as well as the practical side of the sport industry, and falls in the 'process' section of the definition. Scholars conduct sound research in the quantitative and qualitative traditions using content analysis, surveys, narrative analysis, oral history, and other methods to delve into the many intricacies of sport communication. They study everything from sports journalists' routines and the selection of content; the explicit and implicit meanings of sport texts and the emerging narratives and frames; the ratings of programmes like ESPN's *The Sports Reporters* and network game broadcasts; and the financial implications and value of the Wimbledon Championships or the Australian Grand Prix; to human communication in day-to-day activities and interactions at leagues, clubs, teams, sport organisations, university athletic offices, and media outlets.

As evident in the examples above, sport communication is a dynamic process that includes active, interactive, and reactive processes between institutions, texts, and audiences in the public sphere. Sport, according to Wenner (1998), "has always been a conduit or medium through which feelings, values, and priorities are communicated" (p.xiii). Media organisations, networks, leagues, sport organisations, fans, and audiences communicate with each other and through each other. While most entities seek profit first and foremost, communication is a vital element of every single activity and function in sport. Networks seek high ratings and advertising revenue from sponsors and corporations, leagues, teams, and athletes. Teams and leagues seek high exposure through the media, large gate profits through fans and sport enthusiasts, and rely on the successes of their individual workers for sustenance. Organisations use networks, cable outlets, and emerging technologies like the internet and satellite radio to gain recognition, exposure,

and value for their products and programmes. Correspondingly, fans and the media audience or receivers of sport communication messages can accept or reject the message by watching, listening, viewing, reading, or buying, thereby influencing effects, ratings, and exerting purchasing power in their preferences.

Communication in sport involves interdependent and interactive communication and allows for feedback from all entities. This can be as simple as eye contact, but also includes responses to online fan polls and trivia questions, phone calls or e-mails to commend or criticise sport coverage, or provocative and controversial conversations during sports radio talk shows. Sport communication feedback and effects are apparent not only in television ratings and e-commerce spending, but within sports organisations, leagues, teams, and networks. At the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA), communication informs the public about current players' community service contributions, encourages retired athletes to participate in alumni activities, and can also facilitate the marketing of past, current, and future NFL Pro Bowl selections and MVP candidates. For sport media outlets, sport communication could increase fan support for a team, increase ratings, or increase purchases of advertising and commercials. When a team like the Pittsburgh Steelers has a stellar season, media attention increases locally through network affiliates and nationally through cable channels such as ESPN as well as traditional network coverage of games on ABC or CBS. Networks also use information attained from fans to make programming decisions. For sports fans worldwide, they share unique experiences and can communicate with sport communication professionals through various outlets and through other fans. Fans from a Manchester United soccer match in England, a polo match in Argentina, a game featuring the Carlton Blues of the Australian Rules Football League, or a contest involving the Amsterdam Admirals of NFL Europe can then share experiences. They can discuss what they saw at games or on television; what they read in magazines or newspapers; or what they heard from sports anchors. This gives them many opportunities in various contexts to discuss and communicate the multitudinous sport events and activities (Rowe, 1999). For these reasons, all components share a symbiotic relationship with mutually beneficial results. Whether the result is profit or individual pleasure, the process of communication among sport communication entities is vibrant, interactive, and infinite.

While sport communication is interactive and multi-dimensional with communication flowing multilaterally, simple, linear communication models serve as a foundation for processes and communicative actions. The first recognised type of communication models were transmission models, where communication flowed in a linear direction and were Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver (SMCR) models. Early communication pioneers possessed educational backgrounds in sociology or psychology (Greenberg and Salwen, 1996). One such scholar was Lasswell (1949), who posed the question, "Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?" In the Lasswell formula, the communicator, message, medium, receiver/audience, and effects are studied. His formula and other early communication models viewed communication as a persuasive process where the sender sought to influence a receiver with no mention of feedback in the process. Although these original models explained mass communication, certain components can be applied to sport communication although today's audiences possess much more power than scholars originally envisioned. When sport sponsors spend billions of dollars for national and international sporting events, companies such as Joyce Julius or SRI International study and measure for message potency. In SRI's

study of NBC's coverage of the Athens Olympics, it discovered that brand exposure was highest for Swatch and second for Coca-Cola (Analysis: NBC Olympics coverage, 2004). This example demonstrates the importance of exposure in the persuasive process of communicating products' messages to consumers. This linear flow of information to audiences is also apparent in NBC's broadcasts of the Games and its desire to capture viewers. In Athens, NBC garnered a profit of between $60 and $70 million and averaged a primetime rating of 15.0 (Bernstein, 2004).

In addition to reducing communication to a one-way process of information from senders to receivers, linear models failed to recognise that many messages are not sent smoothly from sender to receiver. When a communicator sends a message to the audience, the channel affects how the message is communicated and conveyed and noise or interference as well as context, or the environment, can also impede or promote communication and feedback (Griffin, 2004). For sport communication, this is especially apropos when considering technical difficulties in sports broadcasts or fan noise in a major post-season game. Although these early models failed to consider context, the effect of the channel that is used, and the relationship between the sender and receiver, they provided the foundation for a more accepted communication model first developed by communication researcher Wilbur Schramm. Schramm developed the Simplified Communications Model and the ensuing Schramm-Osgood Model with Charles Osgood in 1954, which included understanding, feedback, and two-way communication in the process. Schramm sought to bolster communication's legitimacy in the field of academia with his emphasis on behavioural sciences (Greenberg and Salwen, 1996). Schramm's model involved a source who encodes a message or signal that is transmitted through interpersonal communication or through a medium, and a destination where the receiver decodes the message or signal (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2004). Unlike the earlier linear models, this model was circular and accounted for the behaviour of various actors in the process. In sport communication, this process is evident in Outdoor Life Network's (OLN) broadcasts of the Tour de France with its analysts and visuals providing detailed coverage for viewers around the globe, who interpret messages and process them either by staying tuned to help increase ratings or switching to another channel, thereby exerting power in the process.

As communication continued its emergence as an academic discipline, the process moved from more empirical approaches to cultural and critical analyses of communication (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2004). "Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication", according to philosopher Dewey (1916).

> "There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common." (p.10)

Dewey and cultural historian James Carey viewed communication as a ritual. The ritual model took a more interactive, meaningful, and interpretive approach to communication (McQual and Windhahl, 1993). According to Carey (1989), "communication is linked to terms such as 'sharing', 'participation', 'association', 'fellowship', and the 'possession of a common faith'" (p.18). Carey (1989) added, "A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of

shared beliefs" (p.18). Pauly (1997) noted that such a perspective views communication as 'conversation' (p.10) and a 'social practice' (p.13) rather than a scientific, utilitarian phenomenon.

In addition to a cultural perspective, The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory originated in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s and Marxist analyses in sport originated after 1950 (Rigauer, 2002). In this tradition, sport is viewed as a historical and social phenomenon affording opportunities for studying the working class and sport. The Frankfurt School, and specifically Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas, developed a model of base and superstructure and studied sport in capitalist and socialist societies (Rigauer, 2002). Marxists believed that power is in the hands of a select few, thereby minimising a diversity of voices and ideas and promoting class domination (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). In this area, hegemony and the consolidation of the sport media industry are relevant areas of inquiry. Messages produced by the elites and dominant ideologies do not always express society's marginalised populations or culturally and ethnic diverse perspectives.

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) recommended analysing factors inside and outside media organisations. While many scholars have studied the process of communication and the effects, other important variables affecting media content must also be considered. Among these entities, according to Shoemaker and Reese, are the media workers and their perceptions of reality; organisational routines at media organisations; certain social, economic, and cultural forces; and hegemony, or the view that the powerful elites' ideologies influence content. Micro-level studies investigate communication between individuals and macrolevel studies networks, organisations, and entire cultures. Lippmann (1922) realised the importance of routines on the news process when he wrote in the seminal work *Public Opinion*, "without standardization, without stereotypes, without routine judgments, without a fairly ruthless disregard of subtlety, the editor would soon die of excitement" (p.123). Tuchman (1973) also studied the routinisation of work and investigated the problem of how newsroom workers processed and imposed routines on nonspecialised unexpected events.

This is in line with the notion of gatekeepers at each level from corporate executives to sports editors, producers, media managers, and reporters, who all function as message filters. The term 'gate keeper' originated in White's (1950, p.384) seminal study, which defined a gate keeper as a wire editor who selected the national and international news for newspapers, including and excluding stories based upon what he or she deems important. This pioneering study showed the subjective and value-based judgments that affect all media content as well as processes. In sport coverage, certain games are shown, certain events are televised, and certain athletes are highlighted. These are just some of the subjective decisions that are part of the sport communication process. There are processes of selection, creation, dissemination, and reception in all processes (Greenberg and Salwen, 1996). In Greenberg and Salwen's model for communication, the selection of messages and content deals with personal attributes of decision-makers, their agendas and preferences, gatekeeping functions, accessibility issues, and the decoding of messages. Creation includes the actual development of messages and the encoding and channels used as well as the objective of the creators. The dissemination part of the process once again deals with gate keeping and the diffusion of news. And finally, reception deals with the audience, their decoding of messages, their uses and pleasure gained, responses, and selections made as well as individual and aggregate effects.

Sport communication, whether face-to-face or mediated, can be conceptualised as the process of producing and delivering messages to an audience of one individual, a few colleagues at the front office of a professional team, or a massive group of sports television viewers watching World Cup soccer around the world. There are many components, including sport institutions, media, audience members, and the various entities within and outside these arenas. Like most communication, sport communication is intentional/unintentional, complex, circular, irreversible, transactional, unrepeatable, dynamic, multi-dimensional, verbal and non-verbal, constant, and continuous. Sports journalists constantly communicate with their sources, editors, managers, and readers through conversations, gestures, e-mails, letters, and articles. Fans communicate with organisations through e-mails, letters, and ticket sales and with other fans through chat rooms, fantasy leagues, and daily discussions of their teams' progress. A front office employee for a team communicates with the media, other managers, colleagues, and fans through daily job routines and responsibilities. The definition of sport communication provided in this analysis relies on a firm foundation of communication theory and takes into account all communication processes.

2.2   …by which people…

Sport communication includes communicators/senders and recipients who are the audience or receivers. Senders and/or receivers can be individuals, small groups, private discussion participants, public discussants, bystanders, lurkers (*i.e.*, individuals who go to a sports internet site and read posts but never write), and any other sport communication participant. Those involved with sport communication and sport media are both senders and receivers for sport communication. For example, the broadcast professionals associated with a broadcast both communicate (send) messages as well as receive message from other stakeholders (*i.e.*, superiors, producers, engineers) and audience members (*i.e.*, ratings, postings on websites).

In sport entities, senders are often managers, owners, athletes, employees, fellow colleagues, and even sport consumers. For example, a sport entity may communicate to its stakeholders by a newsletter, e-mail, a live chat, or a podcast. The receivers in sport organisations are identical individuals taking on other roles. Similarly, the sport entity may field complaints of sport consumers, thus becoming the receiver. In sport media outlets, senders can be general managers, authors, sports editors, producers, reporters, broadcasters, and any other sport media personnel. The receivers in sport media outlets are the listeners, viewers, customers, advertisers, readers, consumers, and any other individual or group who has to decode a sport-related message.

2.3   …in sport, in a sport setting, or through sport…

Any communication that involves sport can be found in the definition of sport communication. This is because of the three areas in which sport communication exists in the sport industry. First, sport communication is communication in sport. An example of this is the communication that athletes and coaches engage in on the field of play. Second, sport communication is communication in a sport setting. For example, when executives write memos for or hold meetings with the employees of the sport organisation, they are engaging in communication in a sport setting. Third, sport communication is communication through sport. This involves such activities as advertising a product in a game programme or broadcasting a sporting event.

The channels of sport communication refer to the medium of communication. In sport organisations, channels of communication often relate to interpersonal communicative activities. This often involves mediated and non-mediated communicating through the use of e-mail, phone calls, the intranet, and various verbal and non-verbal messages. For a sport media outlet, mediated communication involves the spoken, visual, auditory, radio signal, satellite, and other channels. Therefore, the means of communication in sport, in a sport setting, or through sport include everything from websites, written documents, and cell phones to technological innovations, oral communications, and publications.

2.4   …share symbols…

Symbolism is language used in sport to create, maintain, and reinforce the values, beliefs, and culture of sport entities and sporting publics. Symbolism assists sport entities in conveying and assigning meanings to messages. It is a key element in sport communication and widely used in the industry when communicating with internal and external publics. Sharing symbols in the discipline of sport communication refers to the manner in which language is used to create symbolism in sport. The language may create or reinforce certain beliefs and values that are held by sport entities as well as sporting publics. Symbolism conveys meaning, and the interpretation of this language is mostly influenced by the context in which it is used. According to Griffin (2004), language is "the system of verbal or gestural symbols a community uses to communicate with one another" (p.276). Cohen (1976) defined symbols as objects, acts, or relationships that may have many meanings which solicit many emotions in many people. Christian and Dillman (2004) noted that, "symbolic language uses signs that have cultural meaning to convey information" (p.60). In sport communication, this refers to the transmission of messages. These messages include the verbal, non-verbal, spoken, unspoken, written, sport programmes, sport texts, images and sounds of sport, and product advertisements in sport. The shared symbols in sport organisations are those messages, advice, support, and any other communicative act in the sport organisation. In the sport media outlet, the shared symbols are also communicative acts, but they add the components of sport reports, game stories, feature stories, investigative reports, and other mediated communicative activities. The sharing of symbols is affected by many variables such as sense, content, size, style, language, trustworthiness, type of argument, intelligence, and clarity.

Individuals assign multiple meanings based on the context and content of the symbols and messages (Vaughn, 1995). These meanings may be contradictory and can link individuals to other worlds which they may not completely understand but know they should not ignore (Van Buskirk and McGrath, 1999). The context and content of messages and symbols are important because they influence interpretation and culture. Relative to sport organisations, symbols assist in creating an organisational identity and in reinforcing the organisational culture and values of its employees. Organisational symbolism refers to the manner in which members of an organisation utilise various aspects of the organisation to convey the values of the organisation (Dandridge *et al.*, 1980). According to Van Buskirk and McGrath (1999), symbols are the "building blocks of culture" and are bundles of meaning (p.805). These bundles of meaning play a key role in framing the, "perceptions, orientations, commitments, and meanings that cultures hold in place" (p.805).

Symbols have been characterised in numerous ways by scholars. Symbols are thought to illustrate reality, help preserve a calm atmosphere in trying and challenging times, and protect individuals' self-esteem and perception of self-worth (Broms and Gahmberg, 1983; Jackson and Carter, 1984). Vaughn (1995) suggested that although scholars differ in their characterisations of symbols, most agree that symbols take the form of, "stories, ritualized events, specialized language, and material manifestations" (p.222). Stories are narratives which are grounded in factual events but often include false aspects or even elements that are fictional and sensationalised. These stories symbolically illustrate norms and values and ultimately assist in defining an organisation's character (Vaughn, 1995). Many sport entities create and reinforce their image through the various stories they promote and publicise to the sporting public. For example, the perception and brand image of the Green Bay Packers is firmly rooted in its history and idealised through images of Vince Lombardi. The Packers also create a sense of sporting culture by referring to their venue as 'the frozen tundra of Lambeau Field' conjuring up images of fierce competition in an extreme environment of snow and ice. Similarly, storied histories include the Four Horsemen of the University of Notre Dame and Norwegian cross country skiers Vegard Ulvang and Bjørn Dæhlie who each won three gold medals at the 1992 Winter Olympics in Albertville, France. These examples illustrate how stories serve as symbols in creating a certain sport culture.

Ritualised events are those activities that are symbolic, formalised, and repeated. This is exemplified in sport in various forms. For example, one of New Zealand's premier rugby teams, the All Blacks, perform the haka dance prior to each game. This ritualistic activity underscores the culture of rugby in New Zealand and serves to reinforce the values of the All Blacks team. The Olympics also embody ritualistic symbolism in sport through utilisation of the Olympic rings as well as the Opening and Closing ceremonies. The Olympics assist in creating a sport culture without boundaries while also reinforcing national identities. At Wimbledon each year, fans and players dine on strawberries and cream and players, before leaving the court, will bow to the royal box. These rituals have become synonymous with Wimbledon and enhance the mystique and values of the tournament. These traditions establish a Wimbledon culture that is different from the other Grand Slam events in professional tennis.

Specialised language is often utilised to create symbolism and reinforce culture in sport. The use of jargon, slang, or specific phrases and slogans reinforce perceptions and values while symbolically communicating a specific identity (Vaughn, 1995). Phrases such as 'light the lamp' and 'biscuit in the basket' signify the scoring of a goal in the sport of hockey, and these phrases are commonly associated with the sport and are regularly utilised in commentary by members of the sport media. Similar phrases are used in depicting certain aspects in the sport of basketball. The terminology 'nothing but net' to signify a clean shot which does not hit the rim or use the backboard while 'behind the arc' is terminology characterising a shot from the three point line. The phrase 'cheap shot' is a term used in most sports to illustrate an unnecessary foul or act against another player that falls outside the realm of the rules and is considered unsportsmanlike. Specialised language also includes slogans. Many sport slogans are used as branding tools for both sport entities and non-sport entities. Nike is synonymous with 'Just Do It' while Wheaties is considered the 'Breakfast of Champions'.

Other means of symbolism in sport include material manifestations. Material manifestations are often the key aspects or elements of an organisation and are commonly used in branding and marketing the sport entity. Vaughn (1995) noted that:

> "Material elements of an organization include logos, badges, awards, physical settings, and company products. Material symbols are concrete signs that express the central characteristics of an organization and symbolize what an organization has to say about itself, both internally and externally." (p.222)

The lighting bolt represents and symbolises Gatorade sports drink, while the Olympic rings are recognised worldwide. Logos not only communicate a brand image and market the sport entity, but they reinforce its values and culture. As Cohen (1996) suggested, "advertisers whose targets are culturally diverse can benefit greatly by identifying symbols which are universal to mankind" (p.187). The utilisation of symbols is just one of the many facets of sport communication and represents an area in need of further scholarly inquiry.

2.5   *…as they create meaning through interaction."*

Language is central to communication. Griffin (2004) defined language as, "the system of verbal or gestural symbols a community uses to communicate with one another" (p.276). Communication at its most basic level is intrapersonal, or the way we process messages and communicate within ourselves (Goss, 1996). After all, communication starts as individuals learn about the world by and through symbols (Steinfatt and Christophel, 1996). In Griffin's (2004) explanation of the semantic triangle of meaning, the symbol at the bottom left is the actual word used by the communicator. In the bottom right, the referent is the object or concept that the symbol depicts and is agreed upon socially. The thought or reference appears at the top of the triangle and represents the past experiences a person has with something. They are personalised interpretations of objects and concepts, and generally a reference evokes emotions. While language is ambiguous and varies from culture to culture, individuals seek meaning through the communication process and their varied experiences. According to Dewey (1916):

> "All communication is like art. It may fairly be said, therefore, that any social arrangement that remains vitally social, or vitally shared, is educative to those who participate in it. Only when it becomes cast in a mould and runs in a routine way does it lose its educative power." (p.13)

Like Dewey's experiential learning and sharing, sport communication creates meaning through action, interaction, and reactions between the communicators, recipients, and all participants from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. The communicators are the individuals, groups, and organisations that send messages and they are considered encoders. According to Griffin (2004, p.13), encoding is, "translating ideas and feelings into words, sounds, and gestures". In sports broadcasting, encoding involves everything from reporting to production and editing. The recipients, or viewers, must then decode or interpret messages, ideologies, and cultural meanings. Decoding is, "translating words, sounds, and gestures into ideas and feelings in an attempt to understand the message" (Griffin, 2004, p.13). The audience receives messages and also provides verbal or non-verbal responses or feedback, setting the interactive process into motion.

The audience has been a large focus of communication research, especially in terms of media effects. With the modernisation, urbanisation, and industrialisation of US society in the early 20th century, mass society changed relationships creating a more detached social environment (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995). As a result, individuals turned to the media for social cohesion and critical information in their lives. Mass

communication research started prior to World War I due to the growing apprehension of wartime propaganda. The 'hypodermic needle model', otherwise known as 'magic bullet' theory or 'model of unlimited effects' portrayed audiences as powerless to the puissant messages of the media (Carey, 1997, p.15). In mass society, the media injected messages into the audience like a hypodermic needle and they responded uniformly to the pervasive and persuasive messages. From this early theory, social scientists studied the media as a result of the concern on media effects. Some key theories of effects research include uses and gratifications theory, agenda setting theory, adoption of innovation theory, the two-step flow and the diffusion of information, selective influences theory, modelling theory, and cultivation theory.

In 1948, Joseph Klapper disputed the propaganda fears and the 'magic bullet' theory, establishing that empirical research found that the media had limited effects. The limited and selective influences theory proposes that individuals' unique characteristics, social categories, and relationships affect how they react to the media. This turned research more towards the study of uses and gratifications. This theory centred more on psychological attributes of the audience and why they sought specific types of content and avoided other types of content. While the 'magic bullet' theory viewed the audience as defenseless, this theory presented a view of an audience that sought to use the media for specific uses.

Communication scholars also were interested in the power of the press. McCombs' and Shaw's (1972) pioneering agenda setting study explained the importance of individuals' perceptions of reality based upon news media accounts. The media may not have the power to tell the audience what to think, but have the power to tell the audience what to think about. Managers, editors, and reporters have an influence on perceptions of reality since they select important issues to report and place stories in order of priority. In sports journalism, when stories about female athletes contain sexualised and trivialised portrayals, this potentially shapes readers' perceptions of athletes and women in sport (Pedersen *et al.*, 2003).

The adoption of innovation theory describes the process through which individuals adopt a new innovation whether it is a new ideology, a new trend in fashion, or a new mass medium. Because the media bring individuals information about new inventions, this theory is relevant in all facets of consumption (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995). In sport communication, how quickly do sports fans buy HDTV or satellite subscription packages to increase the quality and content of sport coverage? This is just one example of how this theory is relevant today.

In other effects theories, the two-step flow and diffusion of information relate to the audience's acquisition of media messages indirectly from friends, colleagues, and family members. In a media- and information-rich society, information spreads and diffuses through opinion leaders (in the two-step flow) or through friends and family in the diffusion of information. When there is a monumental catastrophic event such as 11 September 2001, or an uncommon occurrence in sports such as when the Boston Red Sox won the 2004 World Series, these theories are especially apropos. In behaviour-related effects theories, modelling theory proposes that the audience models behaviours on actions viewed on television or other media. Children might purchase Nike Lebron III basketball shoes or chew Bubblicious bubble gum if they are fans of the NBA's LeBron James. And finally, cultivation theory was based on George Gerbner's Violence Commission's report on television violence and the effects on children in the 1960s. Gerbner found that individuals who watched a lot of television would view the

world as more violent than those who did not due to the amount of violence depicted in television (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995). In sport communication, this could relate to media broadcasts of boxing events and football hooliganism.

Whether the previous theories dealt with short-term or long-term effects, it is important to study how messages shape values, unite people, celebrate events, create a sense of identity, convey information, teach people, and lead them to action or inaction. Just as audiences use the media to gratify needs, throughout history they have used sport to connect with others, to evoke competitiveness, or simply to satiate a sense of belonging. As Rader (2004) notes, in the 1927 boxing rematch between Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney at Soldier Field in Chicago, more than 104 000 fans attended, contributing to a $2 million gate. An additional 50 million US fans listened to the NBC radio network from living rooms, saloons, and town halls as Graham McNamee offered play-by-play coverage. The event enabled fans to share the moment with others in a meaningful and communicative experience.

3 Discussion and conclusion

Despite exponential increases in the economic, social, political, and cultural implications of sport, a dearth of research exists in sport communication. By definition, sport communication is a process by which people in sport, in a sport setting, or through a sport endeavour, share symbols as they create meaning through interaction. The varied processes and components of this definition as discussed above introduce and reinforce the vitality of this evolving field. While there are some who believe singular elements define sport communication, this view is too simplistic as the dynamic and diverse aspects show the complex nature and tremendous breadth of the field. Sport communication possesses tremendous growth potential around the world in its many facets from print journalism and electronic media to public relations, advertising, theory, research, and emerging technologies.

Sport communication involves the sport communication process, its components, and the communication between sport industry practitioners, organisations, and internal and external stakeholders and the interrelationships between them. Included in this umbrella are texts, content, and symbolic representations as well as institutions, or the organisations that own, run, and finance sport media or sport communication departments; production systems, or the activities involved in putting a sports message together; conditions, including the environment in which the communication in sport or the sport media material takes place; sport communication meanings; audiences; and context. Research is vital in all these areas and will help foster understanding and further scholarly inquiry in this emerging academic discipline. By defining the field and analysing its unique components, another step has been taken in advancing the study of sport and communication and establishing this area as an academic discipline. All sport communication processes, careers, and activities are part of this definition. As a result, the definition provides a framework for critically analysing the field, developing scholarly inquiries, and empirically testing the expansive influences within the discipline.

References

Analysis: NBC Olympics coverage (2004) 'Analysis: NBC Olympics coverage', *Sports Business Journal*, 6 September, p.18.

Battenfield, F.L. (2004) 'An ethnographic study of the culture of communication in the sports information office in a Division I-A athletic program', *Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation*, Florida State University.

Bernstein, A. (2004) 'GE's bid for future games looks even brighter in light of Athens profit', *Sports Business Journal*, 6 September, p.19.

Bernstein, A. and Blain, N. (2002) 'Sport and the media: the emergence of a major research field', *Sport, Media, Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp.1–30.

Broms, H. and Gahmberg, H. (1983) 'Communication to self in organizations and cultures', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 28, pp.482–495.

Burton, G. (2002) *More than Meets the Eye: An Introduction to Media Studies*, Oxford, New York.

Carey, J. (1997) 'The Chicago school and the history of mass communication research', in E.S. Munson and C.A. Warren (Eds.) *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, pp.14–33.

Carey, J.W. (1989) *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, New York: Routledge.

Chaffee, S. (1996) 'Thinking about theory', in M.B. Salwen and D.W. Stacks (Eds.) *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.15–32.

Christian, L. and Dillman, D. (2004) 'The influence of graphical and symbolic language manipulations on responses to self-administered questions', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp.57–80.

Cohen, A. (1976) *Two Dimensional Man*, Berkley, CA: University of California Press.

Cohen, J. (1996) 'The search for universal symbols: the case of right and left', *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 8, Nos. 3–4, pp.187–210.

Costa, C.A. (2005) 'The status and future of sport management: a Delphi study', *Journal of Sport Management*, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp.117–142.

Dandridge, T., Mitroff, I. and Joyce, W. (1980) 'Organizational symbolism: a topic to expand organizational analysis', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 5, pp.77–82.

Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education*, http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/publications/Projects/digitexts/dewey/d_e/chapter01.html (retrieved 24 December 2005).

Goss, B. (1996) 'Intrapersonal communication', in M.B. Salwen and D.W. Stacks (Eds.) *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.335–344.

Grainger, A. and Andrews, D.L. (2005) 'Resisting Rupert through sporting rituals?: the transnational media corporation and global-local sport cultures', *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, Vol. 1, Nos. 1–2, pp.3–16.

Greenberg, B.S. and Salwen, M.B. (1996) 'Mass communication theory and research: concepts and models', in M.B. Salwen and D.W. Stacks (Eds.) *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.63–78.

Griffin, C.L. (2004) *Invitation to Public Speaking*, Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Heath, R.L. and Bryant, J. (2000) *Human Communication Theory and Research: Concepts, Contexts, and Challenges*, 2nd ed., Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Jackson, N. and Carter, P. (1984) 'The attenuating function of myth in human understanding', *Human Relations*, Vol. 37, No. 7, pp.515–533.

Lasswell, H.D. (1949) 'The structure and function of communication in society', in W. Schramm (Ed.) *Mass Communications*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, pp.102–115.

Lippmann, W. (1922) *Public Opinion*, New York: Harcourt Brace.

Lowery, S.A. and DeFleur, M.L. (1995) *Milestones in Mass Communication Research*, 3rd ed., White Plains, NY: Longman.

McCombs, M.E. and Shaw, D.L. (1972) 'The agenda-setting function of mass media', *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp.176–187.

McQuail, D. and Windahl, S. (1993) *Communication Models for the Study of Mass Communications*, 2nd ed., London: Longman.

Pauly, J. (1997) 'Introduction on the origins of media studies (and media scholars)', in E.S. Munson and C.A. Warren (Eds.) *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, pp.3–13.

Pavlik, J.V. and McIntosh, S. (2004) *Converging Media: An Introduction to Mass Communication*, Boston: Pearson.

Pedersen, P.M., Whisenant, W.A. and Schneider, R.G. (2003) 'Using a content analysis to examine the gendering of sports newspaper personnel and their coverage', *Journal of Sport Management*, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp.376–383.

Pitts, B.G., Fielding, L.W. and Miller, L.K. (1994) 'Industry segmentation theory and the sport industry: developing a sport industry segment model', *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp.15–24.

Rader, B.G. (2004) *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports*, 5th ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Rigauer, B. (2002) 'Marxist theories', in J. Coakley and E. Dunning (Eds.) *Handbook of Sports Studies*, London: Sage, pp.28–47.

Rowe, D. (1999) *Sport, Culture and the Media: The Unruly Trinity*, Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Shoemaker, P.J. and Reese, S.D. (1996) *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influence on Mass Media Content*, White Plains, NY: Longman.

Steinfatt, T. and Christophel, D.M. (1996) 'Intercultural communication', in M.B. Salwen and D.W. Stacks (Eds.) *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.317–344.

Tuchman, G. (1973) 'Making news by doing work: routinizing the unexpected', *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 79, No. 1, pp.110–131.

Van Buskirk, W. and McGrath, D. (1999) 'Organizational cultures as holding environments: a psychodynamic look at organizational symbolism', *Human Relations*, Vol. 52, No. 6, pp.805–832.

Van Leeuwen, L., Quick, S. and Daniel, K. (2002) 'The sport spectator satisfaction model: a conceptual framework for understanding the satisfaction of spectators', *Sport Management Review*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp.99–128.

Vaughn, M. (1995) 'Organization symbols: an analysis of their types and functions in a reborn organization', *Management Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp.219–250.

Wenner, L.A. (1998) *Mediasport*, New York, NY: Routledge.

Westerbeek, H.M. and Shilbury, D. (2003) 'A conceptual model for sport services marketing research: integrating quality, value and satisfaction', *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp.11–27.

White, D.M. (1950) 'The "gate keeper": a case study in the selection of news', *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp.383–390.