

Making soufflé with metal: Effects of the coronavirus pandemic on sports journalism practices

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Carolina Velloso 
University of Maryland, USA

Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic significantly – and perhaps permanently – altered the ways by which we lead our personal and professional lives. Sports journalism is no exception – with the seasons of all kinds of sports modified, reduced or cancelled entirely in 2020, reporters on the sports beat had to quickly adapt to ever-changing circumstances. This exploratory study investigates the impact of the pandemic on the practices of sports beat writers during the 2020 season. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 beat writers covering teams in all four major North American sports leagues, this study reveals that the journalists' experiences with the pandemic-imposed conditions underscored already-present trends within sports journalism: namely, a reduction of access to players and coaching due, in part, to increased team control through robust media relations divisions; journalists' overreliance on official team sources; and a move towards feature and data- and analytics-driven stories. This study contributes to literature on sports journalism beat reporting and offers an early insight into how the pandemic conditions might help shape the future of the industry.

Keywords

Sports journalism, coronavirus pandemic, news practices, beat reporting, interviews

Introduction

The global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has sent shockwaves around the world and has significantly – and perhaps permanently – altered the ways by

Corresponding author:

Carolina Velloso, Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland, 7765 Alumni Dr, College Park, MD 20742-5031, USA.

Email: cvelloso@umd.edu

which we lead our personal and professional lives. For the journalism profession, the pandemic has presented an “unprecedented news story,” one that has necessitated fundamental changes in how the processes of newswork are carried out (UNRIC Brussels, 2020). Sports journalism is no exception – with the seasons of all kinds of sports modified, reduced or cancelled entirely, reporters on the sports beat have had to quickly adapt to ever-changing circumstances.

This exploratory study investigates the impact of the pandemic on the established routines of US-based sports beat writers in 2020. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 beat writers covering teams in all four major North American sports leagues, this study reveals the challenges that beat writers faced when covering their teams, adaptation strategies they formulated in response to the challenges, reflections on the impact the season had on their professional capabilities, and expectations for future seasons. It argues that the journalists’ experiences with the pandemic-imposed conditions underscored already-present trends within sports journalism: namely, a reduction of access to players and coaching due, in part, to increased team control through robust media relations divisions; journalists’ overreliance on these official team sources; and a move towards feature and data- and analytics-driven stories. This study contributes to literature on sports journalism beat reporting and offers an early insight into how the pandemic conditions might have helped shape the future of the industry.

Sports and the COVID-19 pandemic

The novel coronavirus, named SARS-CoV-2, was first identified in China in December 2019 (Spiteri et al., 2020). This coronavirus and the disease it causes, COVID-19, have led to a worldwide and still ongoing pandemic that has infected and killed millions globally (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). In the United States, the nation with the highest number of COVID-19-related infections and deaths, the effects of the pandemic have impacted nearly all aspects of life. The stock and labor markets suffered severe negative effects, while preventative measures such as social distancing have limited most gatherings. Workplace conditions have also shifted dramatically in several industries. It is estimated that 70% of people whose job is conducive to remote work transitioned to working from home because of the pandemic, while only 20% of those workers did so before (Parker et al., 2020). Several studies have shown that the pandemic has, perhaps lastingly, impacted how Americans behave, both professionally and personally (Knell et al., 2020; Study of the coronavirus’ impact by the USC Center for the Digital Future and Interactive Advertising Bureau finds rapid life changes and concerns — as well as enthusiasm — while Americans confront the pandemic, 2020).

The pandemic intersected with U.S. sports beginning on 12 March 2020, when the National Basketball Association (NBA) was forced to suspend its season when several players tested positive for the virus (Aschburner, 2020). The season resumed on July 30 in a “bubble” format at Walt Disney World in Orlando, FL, where the rest of the regular season and the playoffs were played (Kay, 2020). The National Hockey League (NHL) also paused its season on March 12. It would later cancel the remainder of the regular season and resume on August 1 with a modified playoff format in two Canadian “hub”

cities (O'Brien, 2020). The start of Major League Baseball's (MLB) season was delayed from March to July, and the schedule was reduced from 160 to 60 games. The bubble format was not used in the regular season, with teams playing in their home parks and traveling for road games as usual, but "hubs" were used for the postseason (Johnson, 2020). The usual September start of the National Football League (NFL) season allowed all 256 regular and 13 playoff games to be played, albeit with modifications, such as the cancellation of pre-season and international games and options for players to opt out of the season due to COVID-19 concerns (Kilgore, 2021). No fans attended NBA or NHL games upon the leagues' resumption, and no fans attended regular season MLB games, although a limited number of fans were permitted in the last two postseason rounds (Axisa, 2020; Powell, 2020; Rosen, 2020; Weatherly and Adams, 2020). The NFL adopted a fluid approach to fan attendance, whereby state-specific guidelines dictated capacity restrictions (ESPN NFL Nation, 2020). In 2021, the four major North American sports leagues mostly returned to normal operations, with crowd capacity limits, social distancing protocols based on vaccination status, and other mitigation measures in place at various times.

Journalism routines and the coronavirus pandemic

Lowes (1999: 6) describes institutionalized work routines as "a distinctive set of patterns and rules of conduct that persist in recognizably similar forms across long spans of time and space, and represent well-organized and widely accepted ways of doing things." Sociologist Tuchman (1973) asserted that routines are implemented in order to "help control the flow of work." Establishing routines is a mediated process that allows for organizations to effectively respond to an abundance of possible work and determine how to best carry out that work. According to Reese and Shoemaker's (2018) hierarchy of principles model, routines are one of the organizing principles that affect media content. They define journalism routines as "patterns of behavior that form the immediate structures of mediawork" and as "unstated rules and ritualized enactments" (399).

Importantly, Tuchman (1973) argued that routines play a crucial role when journalists are called to process and explain unexpected events. Established routines, argues Tuchman, help mitigate the disruption caused by unexpected events. As Berkowitz (1992) shows, journalists usually react to unexpected events via adaptation and improvisation, but those modifications are usually located within a framework of already existing routines that help anchor and orient the journalists' response to the event. Journalists often take for granted "the nature of those readjustments," as routines are deeply ingrained in the fabric of journalistic operations (Tuchman, 1973: 128). Lund and Olsson (2015) show that in times of unexpected crisis, journalists often rely on their own experience and professionalism to report on events when their traditional environments are disrupted. Drawing from previous experience allows journalists to stabilize their situations and form modified routines.

Journalists have certainly been affected by the coronavirus pandemic's upending of traditional professional routines. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, reporters during certain periods vacated the shared newsroom environment and largely worked remotely,

television stations operated with skeleton crews in the studio while anchors reported from home and reporters practiced social distancing in the field, and reporters on beats that were particularly affected, such as arts and sports, took on additional assignments (Clodfelter, 2020; Neason, 2020). The pandemic has also presented an entirely new challenge to journalists: it is a long-term, unexpected event that has impacted nearly all aspects of daily life in ways no other event has in a century. Because of this, much scholarship should be expected on the impact of the pandemic on the routinization of news. This paper aims to make one such contribution as it relates to sports beat reporting.

(Sports) beat writing and sourcing

Beat reporting is a specialized form of journalism in which a reporter is assigned to cover a specific sector (such as health or entertainment) or institution (such as Congress). The US news media is predominantly structured around the division of newswork by beats. Becker and Vlad (2009) argue that the allocation of journalists into beats is a routinization strategy meant to make the work of producing news more manageable. Beat reporting produces standardization in journalism practice in terms of when and how stories are produced, affording predictability to the newsroom (Bennett, 1996).

One of the most important aspects of the division of newsroom work into beats is the specialized knowledge that journalists cultivate within their coverage area. Beat reporters are expected to develop deep familiarity with the people and systems they cover. Because beat writers know intimately the goings-on of their beat, they are expected to generate their own story ideas (Fishman, 2014). Significantly, the specialized knowledge that reporters acquire of their beat allows them to ask more critical questions of their sources, in contrast to general assignment reporters who might be more reliant on the information given to them by their sources (Bennett, 1996).

Significantly, Fishman (2014: 30) found that the beat functions as a “social setting to which the reporter belongs... within this network the reporter makes friends and enemies, passes gossip and shares secrets, conducts business, and goofs off.” Thus, the development of relationships within the beat is a crucial aspect of the duties of the job. Beat reporters become intimately familiar, and often friendly, with sources, other beat writers, and personnel they encounter on a daily basis and year-round.

However, previous scholarship has shown evidence that the pressures of daily newswork can lead to the overreliance on a small number of sources (e.g. Atwater and Fico, 1986; McEnnis, 2018). That is, when reporters develop positive working relationships with sources, they are more likely to keep returning to those sources rather than seek out other sources that might lend diversity to the news product. Oftentimes, these sources are public relations officials “acting as a mouthpiece for establishment (elite) actors” (Van Leuven et al., 2018: 798). Atwater and Fico (1986: 60) further argued that “specialized groups of news sources become increasingly familiar with the news-processing behavior of media,” which could leave reporters vulnerable to the strategic ways by which these sources package and disseminate information.

Like other beat reporters, sports writers are expected to establish a wide network of sources, the most important of which are establishment actors: players, coaches, athletic

directors and management professionals. However, this can lead to a dependence of sports beat writers on a select group of sources within their beat to generate a majority of their team coverage (Rowe, 2007). Especially for game stories, in which the events of a particular game or match are summarized, sports writers rely extensively on official or team sources. Before and after every game, reporters attend press conferences in which a group of players and the coach or manager, selected by the team's public relations staff, answer questions from the media. Most teams also provide locker room access to reporters for a set amount of time before and after games, during which reporters can approach players of their choosing and engage them in one-on-one or small group interviews (Boyle, 2006; Lowes, 1999; Washburn and Lamb, 2020). Nevertheless, as McEnnis (2018: 215) argues, "sports journalism's problems are exacerbated by its fixation and dependence on official sources to both generate and validate stories." The International Sports Press Survey 2011 (2013), a large-scale study of sports journalists across North America and Europe, showed a strong reliance on team sources: "60% of the reporting deals with athletes, coaches, spokespersons or representatives as a source for the coverage." Scholars like Serazio (2018: 59) have further argued that, because sports beat writers rely so heavily on this limited number of sources, they might be remiss to cover teams with an overly critical eye, for "the fear of 'ostracism' remains especially acute."

Recent trends in sports journalism

More recently, technological advances have impacted the routinization of sports journalism. In the post-Internet age, sports writers are required to produce more stories per week and perform additional duties outside of story writing. Whereas sports journalists had previously written and filed game stories that would be seen in print the following day, they now file advance stories to be published online and updated later, write more commentary and analysis pieces, maintain an active presence on social media (especially Twitter), and communicate with readers via email and social media (Shermak, 2017; Washburn and Lamb, 2020). Sports journalism has thus increasingly relied on feature, commentary and analysis pieces in addition to regular game stories (Boyle, 2006: 42). This is partly due to the intense competition between sports beat writers to produce unique content to attract and retain readers for their publication. The ubiquity of social media over the last decade has also dramatically impacted sports journalism practices. Social media can be conceptualized as a "competitor to journalism" because of how it upended traditional news gatekeeping models (Nölleke et al., 2017: 511). With the ability to reach audiences directly through social media channels, many people, groups and organizations can break news themselves without relying on journalism's function of information dissemination. As Lowes and Robillard (2018: 310) put it, "sports journalists no longer have a monopoly over ringside seats."

In addition to the changes brought about by digital and social media, the rise of organized and sophisticated media relations divisions within teams and leagues, which attempt to control the flow of information to the media, also led to a restructuring of sports journalists' traditional locations within the sports journalism complex (Boyle, 2006). Sports beat writers have long enjoyed a close relationship with the entities they cover;

namely, with players, coaches, and team officials. In the pre-Internet age, when teams relied almost exclusively on media to disseminate information, team staff granted journalists ready access to players and readily facilitated the development of reporter-source relationships (Daum and Scherer, 2018; Lowes, 1999). However, the general democratizing of information flow via the Internet and social media have “reduced [teams’] historical dependency on traditional media coverage and publicity” (Daum and Scherer, 2018: 562). Sherwood et al. (2017) found that contemporary team media management staff strategically use their control of information flow to influence news agendas about their team and players. Part of this strategy involves reducing media access, which used to be “the default position of their roles” (p. 526). Team PR staffers can better “control the content and its distribution” by selectively deciding to whom to release information or grant access to players and coaches (Sherwood et al., 2017: 526). As Serazio (2018: 57) put it:

“Direct access for reporting [has] gotten more difficult, even as those [sports journalists] are reporting on are far more ‘accessible’ to the public through social and owned media channels. Beat writers are being squeezed by agents, sponsors, and organizations, who wield ever greater leverage over the athlete sources they need to supply the content.”

Methodology

This study featured in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 sports journalists in the United States. The journalists work for three types of news media: traditional legacy newspapers that are the paper of record in their cities; a national, digital-only outlet; and the official news arms of teams. This allowed for a diverse representation of the types of publications that provide sports coverage. It is important to note that reporters from the news arms of teams work for the relevant sports league, and not an independent publication. There can be differences in practices and expectations between in-house and independent reporters. For instance, in-house reporters might refrain from producing stories that are too critical in exchange for greater access to certain sources (Moritz and Mirer, 2021). However, the responses of the in-house reporters I interviewed did not differ significantly from those of the other reporters, in line with Mirer’s (2016, 2019, 2022) findings that “most hired into this role view themselves as journalists” (2019, abstract). The responses from the two in-house reporters are therefore considered similarly to the rest of the responses in the findings.

All interviewees fit Shermak’s (2017: 121) definition of sports beat writers: they “cover specific sports or teams, attending nearly every team function, including games, practices, press conferences, and more, establishing relationships of varying degrees of intimacy to acquire information.” Respondents cover teams in the four major North American sports leagues: the National Football Association (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), the NBA, and the NHL. Five cover baseball, three cover football, two cover basketball and two cover hockey. The sample consisted of 10 men and two women (see Table 1). This gendered breakdown is reflective of the status of sports journalism as still overwhelmingly dominated by men. According to Lapchick (2021), only around 14% of sports journalists

are women. Although participants were not asked to articulate their racial identity, the sample as a whole skews white, which is also consistent with the racial makeup of sports journalists, of which only about 23% are people of color (Lapchick, 2021). In addition, all participants remained continuously employed by their organizations throughout the 2020 season. Participants' names have been omitted for anonymity, and they will be identified through pseudonyms.

The author sought and obtained IRB approval before beginning outreach, and all interviews were in compliance with IRB protocol. A purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants, as this sampling method leaves it to the judgement of the researcher to select participants that will be most informative based on certain criteria (Moser and Korstjens, 2018). The researcher contacted, via email, beat writers from three major metropolitan areas, with each area having teams from at least two leagues. A total of eight journalists were contacted in the first round of outreach, five of whom responded and were willing to be interviewed. Another 12 journalists were contacted in a second round of outreach, four of whom agreed to be interviewed. Two more journalists were recruited in a third round of outreach. The final participant was recruited through a referral from a respondent from the first group. After dates and times for interviews were mutually agreed upon, the author emailed participants consent information sheets outlining the study's IRB protocol, and the participants verbally consented before interviews began.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom or phone call in October and November 2020. While interviews were necessarily remote due to institutional limits on in-person research during the pandemic, the use of digital media in qualitative interview methodology presented "new opportunities for reflexive and critical interview research" (Neilson, 2018: 154). Interviews were semi-structured, as this form of interviewing is "more flexible and organic in nature...[and] encourages interviews to be creative, adapt to ever-changing circumstances, and cede control of the discussion to the interviewee" (Tracy, 2018: 139). As such, semi-structured interviews "allow for more emic, emergent understandings to blossom, and for the interviewees' complex viewpoints to be heard without the strict

Table I. Sports journalist interviewees.

Name	Gender	Sport	Outlet
Lucas	Man	Basketball	National, digital-only
Frank	Man	Football	National, digital-only
Blake	Man	Football	Legacy
Olivia	Woman	Basketball	Legacy
Aaron	Man	Hockey	National, digital-only
Emily	Woman	Baseball	National, digital-only
Jason	Man	Baseball	Team news arm
Scott	Man	Baseball	Legacy
Robert	Man	Hockey	Legacy
Matthew	Man	Football	Legacy
Doug	Man	Baseball	Team news arm
Peter	Man	Baseball	Legacy

constraints of scripted questions” (Ibid.). Participants were asked a set of loosely organized questions about their weekly routines during the pandemic-affected season, major changes they experienced, particular challenges presented by the new set of circumstances, and expectations for the following season. However, interviews were responsive to the participants’ individual responses, and follow-up questions were asked as needed. The average interview length was 20 min.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author. Transcription occurred as soon as possible after each interview. Once transcription was completed, the author hand-coded the transcript for recurring themes. The transcripts were then imported into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Using the constant-comparison method (Glaser, 1965) the author organized and reorganized similar codes across the interviews into major themes and subthemes. This resulted in the formulation of “theoretical properties” of the categories and the ways by which the categories relate to each other (Glaser, 1965). Interview quotes have been edited for length and clarity where necessary.

Findings

This study revealed three major findings: that the pandemic conditions exacerbated a decrease in access to players and coaches, underscored sports reporters’ overreliance on a narrow set of sources, and accelerated the move towards feature and data-driven reporting. I consider them in turn below.

Lack of access

The greatest frustration expressed by the participants was a reduction in access to players and coaches. Practically all events involving contact between journalists and players, including pre- and post-game press conferences, were conducted remotely during the 2020 season. Because journalists could not choose which players would be made available for the virtual press conferences – and could not otherwise engage with other players in the locker room, like they normally would – they said they were not able to speak to as many players as usual after a game. The lack of access to the team’s venue, especially the locker rooms, also hindered the writers’ ability to get interesting quotes. There was a consensus that simply being in the venue sometimes generated situations that led to interview opportunities. Robert, the hockey writer, described it as a process of “osmosis,” in which opportunities often manifested themselves just by being physically present. “You’re at the rink and the general manager’s there, you’re running other people [down], and you can talk to them and get their opinions on different things. But now, not being at the rink, you did not have that access,” he said. Some writers also said they were not able to speak to players who play less visible positions. These players usually draw less attention than players in star positions, and were thus more readily accessible in locker rooms and would spend more time with the writers. However, during the 2020 season, media management staff rarely, if at all, made those players available over videoconference, since the limited number of players who could be interviewed each day meant that the more visible players got priority.

In addition, the participants spoke of discomfort on the part of both interviewers and interviewees when engaging over videoconferencing software, especially when their leagues first transitioned to a virtual environment. Olivia, a basketball writer, said the players could not see the reporters' faces when they were answering questions, which made for a somewhat awkward experience. Lucas, a basketball writer, agreed that the inability to see each other's faces affected the quality of the players' answers. "The best question-askers in press conferences are the ones who allow the person who's up on that podium to be able to just have tunnel vision for that split second, and see just the questioner as if you're having a conversation," he said. This tunnel vision was not possible over video. The writers said a lot was lost in translation in virtual press conferences. Playing off physical cues constitutes an important part of their reporting process, and the inability to do so made asking questions and obtaining satisfactory answers more difficult. Olivia said it was "harder for players and coaches to get the gist of what you were asking" without the benefit of eye contact and body language, which usually helps signal to players the "things that you actually want them to talk about." Matthew said that he sometimes hesitated to ask more pointed questions out of concern that, without visual signals, a player or coach might misinterpret his intent.

The writers also pinpointed the need to become more strategic in their interviewing process because of the decreased access to players and coaches. Since the window of time they had with these sources was smaller than usual, the writers had to sharpen their interviewing skills in order to obtain the information they were seeking. Crucially, Jason said he learned how to obtain the information he needed using fewer sources: "We honed some of our reporting skills a little bit more, [especially] our sourcing. Who do you really need to talk to you to get this information? Do you need to talk to eight or do you need to talk to four? Because you're not going to [get] eight people."

The writers characterized the 2020 season as "transactional" and "impersonal" because it was much more difficult to build or nurture relationships with players, coaches and sources. "It was a huge difference in terms of how you do your job and the stories you get to write...everything was formalized," said Peter, a baseball writer. To the reporters, developing these relationships is one of the most important components of beat writing, and one that distinguishes it from other types of journalism. An established feeling of mutual understanding and respect between writer and source directly affects the level of access to the source, the quality of the interview, and the ability to break news. The inability to have close and consistent contact with sources, therefore, was frustrating. "If you have those relationships, [if] you're just good at getting players to talk to you, that's when you can get really good interviews, because they relax," said Lucas. "If they know you're someone who does not screw them over, someone who's fair, they'll actually talk to you." Frank, a football writer, said that his casual interactions with players not only improved his stories by generating unexpected insights, but also inspired ideas for future stories. As he put it: "the player might say something that triggers your mind as to something for that minute or for later. Now, all those interactions are basically out the window."

Olivia, who had recently transitioned to her beat, said her worry about not maintaining relationships with players was even more acute, since she had not yet had a chance to

properly form them yet. “It just made it so much harder to get to know these guys,” she said of the virtual environment. “Whenever the next time we see them in person, I’m hoping that they recognize my voice and remember who I am, and are like, ‘oh yeah, she was asking questions in the bubble’. I was missing the casual interaction.”

Another challenge to interacting with sources in the virtual environment were the few opportunities to conduct one-on-one interviews. The public video press conferences were the predominant avenue for interaction between writers and players. The writers again stressed the hindrance of not having locker room access and needing to rely mostly on the video conferences to obtain quotes from players. The writers lamented the lack of privacy in this virtual environment. “As a beat writer, part of what you do is you build relationships with players, you talk to them at the locker and get good information from them,” said Aaron. “But you could not really do that on Zoom because you were not having a one-on-one conversation. You were talking to a player with seven other reporters and a staff member from the [team], so you could not really have any in depth conversations with the players, you were just getting sound bites, and it wasn’t really good.”

Because they had to ask all questions in front of every other writer on the call, some writers felt they could not ask players certain questions for stories they were working on. They feared that if they asked any question that was not directly related to the game, other writers might pick up on their story ideas and “scoop” them. As Frank put it: “Any question you ask is going to be blasted to every other person reporter on the beat. So if you’re working on a story that is unique, that isn’t just simply writing off that day’s events, you’ve got to figure out a way on some level to slip it in there without anybody either noticing or being prepared that they may and that could lead other things.” Jason similarly felt that the more public nature of interviewing over Zoom limited his ability to write interesting stories not strictly within the confines of his beat.

Overreliance on a narrow set of sources

The reduced access to reporters’ frequently used sources underscores sports journalism’s overreliance on a narrow set of sources. In line with literature on sports journalism and sourcing (e.g. McEnnis, 2018; Van Leuven et al., 2018), the respondents relied heavily on ready access to players, coaches, and team public relations professionals. During a typical season, the beat writers would be at their teams’ venues multiple days a week, participating in press conferences after practices and before and after games. Additionally, the writers interviewed players in a more informal setting in locker rooms. Because of COVID-related restrictions implemented for the 2020 season, most of these rituals were disrupted. Since writers could not interact directly with players and coaches, there was no locker room access and press conferences occurred entirely on videoconference or by phone.

The virtual environment brought about by the pandemic only highlighted the journalists’ dependence on teams’ media relations staff for access to players. During videoconferences, the respondents could not pick which players or coaches to interview; they could make specific requests to the management staff, but the staffers ultimately made final decisions about whom the respondents could interview. Matthew, a football writer,

characterized this as team media management staff having more “leverage” than in previous seasons. Because the management staff decided who the writers could speak to on the video press conferences – and there were no alternative, more informal settings in which to ask questions, like locker rooms – the writers felt that teams were able to better control narratives in media coverage than in previous seasons.

Emily, a baseball writer, directly addressed the issue of overreliance on team sources and the gatekeeping role of media management staff. “I just find that a lot of our industry is overly reliant on PR providing players and coaches and availability and times, and I’ve never relied on that,” she said. Instead, she looked outside of team avenues to find sources and conduct interviews. “I personally have just contacted guys and used my own contacts,” she said, and “stayed away from asking really anything I want other people to steal on Zoom.” Because of this, she felt that the pandemic-related characteristics of the 2020 season did not greatly affect her ability to get quotes or nurture her relationships with sources. She thus avoided some of the situations over which other writers expressed frustration. Emily felt that a lot of the grievances expressed by other writers were the consequence of these longstanding issues in the sports journalism beat, and because she did not as heavily rely on those sourcing practices, she said she was not as affected by the restrictions.

A move towards feature and data-driven reporting

The altered conditions of the 2020 season and the challenges they brought, particularly the decreased access to players, led the writers to move increasingly away from daily game coverage towards more data-driven pieces and features on “big picture” topics. This finding thus falls in line with scholarship (Boyle, 2006; Shermak, 2017; Washburn and Lamb, 2020) that demonstrates a trend towards data-driven and longform pieces in sports journalism.

The reporters said that, because of the difficult circumstances of the season – including the period during which sports were shut down and no games were being played, the lack of choice in which players they could talk to at press conferences and the inability to seek out interviews in locker rooms – they wrote different types of stories to which they might not have dedicated time during a regular season. Because of the restricted access to players and coaches, several writers said they found themselves producing more stories that did not depend as heavily on direct quotes. Analysis pieces, which involved more of their own perceptions, data, or outside sourcing than on official commentary, were particularly popular. Scott, a baseball writer, said that more “thought-intensive” analysis pieces were “the only thing that was readily available to do on a regular basis.”

Matthew said he leaned more on game and player data, as well as assessments from other journalists and experts, to complement his stories. This included “reaching out to more experts, or former players who work at ESPN, or the NFL Network, or college coaches, just to help fill in the gaps.” Aaron honed in on the use of analytics to enhance his stories, spending a considerable amount of time learning analytics in order to incorporate more statistics and technical information in his stories. He said that he would “bring all

those new tools with [him] whenever things start again, and hopefully it'll improve [his] writing and give fans a little more meat to chew on when they're reading [his] stories.”

Several writers indicated that they coped with the limited opportunities to speak to players and gather quotes by focusing on “big picture” topics when they did interview them. Olivia, for example, said that she turned to “stockpiling” quotes to not only have content around which to write feature stories, but also to help enliven game stories. “I had to be really smart with the information I was getting,” she said. Lucas said that, in the summer of 2020, he managed to do phone interviews with two of his team’s star players. He made sure to ask questions that he knew would yield answers that were not very time-sensitive so that he could use the quotes for multiple stories down the line — “it’s all evergreen-type stuff,” he said. From these interviews, Lucas released one story each in June, July and August, with at least one more still unreleased at the time of his interview.

The reporters also spoke of experimenting with different concepts for, and tools in, their stories. Some of the reporters found more unorthodox stories to write when there was a lull in their schedule for traditional content. They said that the pandemic-affected season presented an opportunity to try out material they normally would not write to see how readers reacted to it. Aaron mentioned specifically the new types of stories he tried during the season: “I was doing fan surveys, I was writing about the greatest [team] athletes to wear numbers 1 through 99, whatever I could do to keep people engaged and reading [the outlet’s] product.”

The journalists expressed that the elimination of crucial rituals that they had come to rely on as reporters – such as extensive access to the venue and the players – forced them not only to reexamine their sourcing methods, but also to become more innovative in how they told stories. For example, Lucas said he felt that he was still able to produce compelling stories despite the limitations of the 2020 season. While the pandemic circumstances laid bare many issues in sports journalism practice, Lucas felt that having to do more with less would serve him well when conditions eventually returned to normal. He explained with an analogy:

It’s almost like an episode of ‘Chopped’ where they’re like, ‘okay, go make me a soufflé. And [you] say, ‘okay, that’s easy’. And then when [you’re] halfway into the soufflé, they say, ‘okay, now finish the soufflé using only metal.’ And you’re like, ‘what? How do I make a soufflé with metal? You can’t even eat metal’. And then by the end, [you’re] like, ‘wow, this made me so much better at making soufflé when I can actually go back and use the things that you’re supposed to use to make soufflé’.

Discussion and conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic threw the major US sports leagues into disarray. So, too, did the pandemic significantly alter the ways by which journalists went about their day-to-day reporting. Specifically, the pandemic destabilized traditional sports journalism routines. Because sports journalists rely on their cultivated network of sources within their beat, the respondents struggled with reduced access to players, especially outside of the limited press conferences predetermined by team media management staff. The respondents were

also adversely affected by the introduction of new technology into their interview processes. While they ultimately grew more comfortable using Zoom to conduct interviews, the reporters felt a significant disruption to their usual routines of obtaining information from players, which is a crucial component of their jobs. In addition, the journalists pivoted away from a primary focus on game stories (especially when play was suspended entirely at the height of the pandemic) and towards longform feature and data- and analytics-driven pieces.

This paper argues that the pandemic accelerated and exacerbated already-existing trends within the sports journalism space – namely, a reduction of access to players, owing partly to gatekeeping practices by team media management staff; an overreliance on official team sources; and a move towards emphasizing feature and analytics-focused pieces rather than game stories. Because pre- and post-game press conferences needed to happen via videoconference during the 2020 season, this allowed teams' media management staff to exercise even more control over which players and coaches reporters could speak with. While previous literature (Boyle, 2006; Lowes, 1999; Sherwood et al., 2017) established that robust media management departments have transformed traditional balances of power between teams and sports journalists, remote events enabled management staff to regulate access to players to an even greater degree. This further reduction of access to sources – about which the interviewees expressed almost universal frustration – laid bare a longstanding trend in sports journalism whereby reporters overwhelmingly use official team sources in their stories, and especially in game stories (e.g. McEnnis, 2018; Van Leuven et al., 2018). Because sports journalists depend on these sources to generate a large portion of their coverage (Rowe, 2007), they were left especially vulnerable to the pandemic-imposed conditions. Finally, the challenges of 2020 season described above prompted reporters to pivot away from stories that heavily relied on access to team sources and towards stories that required little to none of these sources. Namely, the journalists emphasized longform feature stories – in which reporters could recycle quotes from previous stories or include unused quotes from earlier interviews – and data- and analytics-driven pieces. This study thus advances current scholarship by arguing that the conditions created by the pandemic accelerated this move. While previous scholarship has identified an increase in these types of stories on sports journalism beats due to increased competition and the fast-paced networked media environment (Lowes and Robillard, 2018; Nölleke et al., 2017), this paper extends the literature by demonstrating that feature and data-driven stories are increasing in prominence also because of the changing power dynamics between teams and sports journalists in terms of access to venues and players.

This study provides useful early insight on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on sports journalism trends, and it could be expanded upon in subsequent research. While this study presented experiences of reporters across the “Big Four” US sports leagues four sports, future research could include respondents who cover other major leagues. It is possible, for example, that beat writers covering the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) or Major League Soccer (MLS) faced different challenges or had different experiences. However, an expansion into these additional leagues would still center a US context. Future research could also examine the effects of the pandemic on

sports journalism trends in other countries. After all, the traditional routines and practices experienced on an American sports beat may differ significantly to those of other media systems.

The journalists interviewed in this study did not indicate the potential impact of their racial or gendered identities upon the experiences they described, but future research should also interrogate to what extent these identities play a role in the sports journalists' exercise of their profession and their effects on their perceptions of sports journalism trends. A future study might also want to have equal gender representation in its sample and consider whether there were any gendered differences in the experiences of the reporters.

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ORCID iD

Carolina Velloso  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7674-6015>

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Author biography

Carolina Velloso is a PhD candidate at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland, where she also previously earned her M.A. She researches at the intersection of gender, race and identity in journalism, with a particular interest in the professional experiences of women and minority journalists. Her scholarship has been published in several leading journals and has won numerous awards, including the AEJMC History Division's top student paper award and Diversity in Journalism History Research Award, and the Media Ethics Division's Professional Relevance Award.