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Source Credibility in Sports Journalism

The issue of credibility in sports is seen as one of the most profound issues in journalism today. Credible sources provide attribution to readers, fans, players, and society alike.

Often, when a person hears or sees something on the news, they believe it. However, it is certainly possible that viewers have no idea where that news came from. Viewers believe the news because they trust that journalists and news anchors are providing their best coverage. Source credibility is a large issue circulating journalists today. In this paper, the issues of competition, anonymity, and financial pressures among others in sports journalism will be analyzed and critiqued to pinpoint exactly why and how this relates to the journalistic issue of source credibility today.

When it comes to credibility, there are three major factors to look for in a source. The first is clarity, meaning the source needs to be clear and organized. Nothing should be confusing, and the source should be easy to understand. Using small and similar words makes it easy for sources to cite a reporter and have it easier for their readers to understand.

The second factor is accuracy. For a source to be credible, it needs to be correct and fluid. No grammatical errors, no misspellings of words, correct use of quotations and paragraphs, and more. Accuracy is key because when reporters know a source that puts out accurate work, they will continue to go back to that source when writing stories.

The last factor is trustworthiness. It takes a while to build a relationship with sources. When a source proves they can be trusted with solid information, journalists and reporters alike remember. Often, a reporter or journalist would much rather have few trustworthy sources versus multiple iffy sources who don't always provide the best information.

Anonymous sources can be a major difficulty for reporters when writing stories. It is an incredible challenge to write a solid, credible story if the sources used are anonymous. Not only will readers find it hard to believe what they are reading, but editors and publishers will also find it fishy if all sources used in a story are anonymous. Although, usually sources prefer to stay anonymous when giving out information. In fact, in an interview with Rob Demovsky, ESPN NFL Nation reporter for the Green Bay Packers, he said "oftentimes, people don't want to be a source. This is because if the source is wrong, and their name is used in a story, they could be seen as a not credible source for future stories. Demovsky also discussed that sources are typically people that should not even know as much as they do. If they reveal their names, they could get in trouble within their career.

In the journalism field, it is all about competition and who can get the information first. This especially relates to sports journalism. Although it is all about competition, the information must also be accurate. When it comes to sports, rumors spread like wildfire. This field is all about speculation and who you know. Many journalists have their primary sources that always have accurate information and provide it promptly. When it comes to trusting new sources, it takes a while to build a relationship. This is especially true, in order to not have any concerns with inaccurately reported information.

Although journalists more often than not have their usual sources to rely on, sometimes they go to others for information. This is especially true when it comes to busy times of the year, such as the NFL off-season. In fact, the Green Bay Packers made a major change to their

coaching staff in hiring Matt LaFleur as their head coach this past January. With this change, Rob Demovsky said, in regard to new sources and people surrounding the team, "It's important to build connections with your sources. When someone tells you something that you've never heard from before, that's when you find that they're credible". The more sources, the better, because in reality, it's all about who has the most accurate information, and who receives it the fastest.

Another aspect of the competition is network competition. Many of the major sports networks: ESPN, NFL Network, CBS, NBC, amongst others are always trying to be the first to report the news. This is so that their network name will have to be cited by others when the information is shared. It is incredibly critical to release news as soon as it is received, especially if it is proven true and not speculated. For example, in an article titled "Reporters rely on anonymous sources in heightened NBA coverage, written by Christopher Massie, he says: "On Friday, ESPN's Marc Stein reported that "The Houston Rockets and Los Angeles Lakers are amongst many teams expected to try to persuade the Phoenix Suns to part with star guard Goran Dragic." However, on Tuesday, Adrian Wojnarowski, Yahoo Sports' notorious scoop artist, reported that the Suns were determined to keep Dragic. Then, that night, USA Today's Sam Amick wrote that Dragic informed the Suns that he would not be returning after the season. By Wednesday afternoon, following reports that he made a list of the teams he wanted to be traded to, Dragic himself was openly telling the press that he was unhappy in Phoenix. It wasn't until Thursday afternoon that reports indicated that the Miami Heat was the front-runner for Dragic, and it wasn't until minutes before the deadline that Stein and Wojnarowski both reported the news of the trade, seconds apart, in tweets that were retweeted more than 7,000 times combined." This is an exact case of different reporters all reporting different things. Reporters want to release information as soon as they receive it, no matter if it is accurate or not. This not

only affects networks, but it also affects the reporters because they lose reliability as being credible sources.

Another issue that sports journalists face when it comes to credibility is anonymity. Sources often do not want to be identified, because, ironically, they are not even supposed to know of the information themselves. When journalists don't have specific names or references for sources, it does make readers question where the information is coming from and if it is credible. Although, there is another side to the argument of anonymous sources. Some sources won't release information unless they can stay anonymous. If a source has credible, important information, especially when dealing with sports, journalists will report the information no matter if the source is anonymous or not. Another part of this argument is that a lot of the time, all that's said when a rumor is released is "per source". According to Rob Demovsky, that can mean anything. In fact, sources are usually players' agents, team officials, or even the player themselves. The biggest part of being a source is that a person is not hired to work as a "source", but rather they just release the information if they happen to come across it. As stated before, source credibility is all about competition, the faster and more reliable you are at releasing information, the more attributable you are.

Another topic related to source credibility is financial pressure. It is proven that bigger companies with more of a following can pay more to find out crucial information. A news story coming from ESPN or a larger media conglomerate is a lot more credible than a news story coming from a smaller news conglomerate. This also goes off of availability. Often, it is the local reporters that are in the locker room after Packers practice. It is the local reporters that break the big stories and try to get credit, even though the larger conglomerates end up breaking the big news stories. Another reason that financial pressure looms large is that conglomerates such as ESPN can charge readers extra money to read their news. While some reporters are working

their tails off trying to gain a following, ESPN is charging extra for top tier news coverage. In fact, in 2016, ESPN launched ESPN+, streaming that shows extra coverage of smaller teams, more in-depth interviews with players and coaches, and other information not worthy of being on their main channel. The ironic part about this is that people will pay the fee per month for this service. This is because ESPN is such a credible source.

Local newspapers are fighting for their lives in the industry. The Green Bay Press-Gazette has a paywall, meaning that a reader can only read up to five stories before having to pay to keep reading. Local newspapers are going up against the big conglomerates such as ESPN, who don't charge for their basic news coverage but charge extra for coverage the basic everyday reader does not need. A major reason for this is that newspaper and written journalism have more credibility. Although the writers of newspapers and magazines still have credibility, they are less reliable because not as many people read them. Even though the Press Gazette may only charge about five dollars a month to read their stories, that is what it takes for the newspaper to be able to keep producing stories for the community. No matter what the source is, if it is credible, truthful, and has information to back it up, it is viable and should not be looked past.

Source credibility can be referred to as a game. Who can find the information and release it to the public the fastest? Who has the largest following of fans to spread the information to? This is a reason that ESPN expanded its NFL coverage. Previously, the network only had one reporter per division, but in the previous years has expanded to each team having their own reporter. Mr. Rob Demovsky, the Packer's reporter for ESPN, says that having more coverage increases credibility and following a ton. Having one reporter per team allows for that reporter to develop relationships with not only the players and coaches but the organization as a whole. As a reporter, being close with the team gives them more insights and more sources

within the personnel of the team. This proves to fans that the reporter is all about their team and nothing else. Fans feel comfortable believing the information that these reporters are putting out.

Favoritism is also a large part of credibility. Followers will read sources they know are true no matter what. Many readers have sources they have trusted for years, and are not open to reading the work of other reporters. Even though Mr. Demovsky, for example, says working for ESPN gives him more recognition, it is important to branch out and read the works of other reporters. If a reader reads something off of Twitter, they are way less likely to believe that than a big-name reporter. The other fact is that local news reporters are seldom the first to break news. It's always ESPN. There is favoritism in the locker room as well. Reporters are always going to gather around the more popular players on the team, rather than the ones who don't play as often. This is because it is easy for reporters to write stories on the big names. However, it is also essential to single out certain players or stories in order to have out-of-the-ordinary stories other reporters do not know about. For example, Demovsky told me in an interview that he typically waits back in the locker room for all the other reporters to leave. This allows him one-on-one time with the players, where he can ask questions that nobody else was able to ask. When a reporter gets a one-on-one with a player, they are always going to take advantage of the opportunity and write a good story. An example of this is when Mr. Demovsky got the opportunity to ask Packers running back Aaron Jones a question about whether he got fined for waving to an opposing player on defense while en route to the end zone to score a touchdown. Demovsky said, "I was able to create a story with information that nobody else had, and they had to credit me".

When other reporters have to give credit to the original author, it not only gives the original more credibility but also the network that they work for. The more credibility the reporter

gets, the more he will be liked by players, coaches, fans, and his co-workers alike. It also gives a name to the people the story is written about. Having a direct source, a direct quote from a person, makes them the most credible source in the situation.

Another way that journalists make sure they are credible is by recording in the locker room. Not only do local news stations provide big, bulky cameras, some reporters bring simple voice recorders to capture what sports personnel have to say. This allows them to go back and listen, instead of having to focus on every word they hear in an interview. Having the ability to go back and listen also allows the reporter to ask not only more questions, but more in-depth questions that could help them write a solid story at the end of it. Sometimes, it's not about how much information the reporter has, but how they use the information to create a credible story. Readers will always go back for good content, and they will always trust a reporter if they have proved credible in the past. Some reporters have lost credibility by providing false information. Sometimes they hear something and get too excited, and then release the information to their following without even checking its credibility. This is when news can come back and haunt a reporter. Their job is to provide balanced, unbiased, trustworthy information to their readers, and when they fail to do that, they lose their following.

Providing false information is another way that reporters can lose their job. That's why it is so important to have reputable sources at all times. If reporters provide inaccurate news and others cite them for it, then the fake news will circulate all over the news. This happened to the Milwaukee Brewers in 2015 when an attempted trade fell through. Originally, it was reported that star center fielder Carlos Gomez was being traded to the New York Mets. It was reported by the MLB Network, a credible source, and was floating all around social media and sports news. After the end of the Mets game that day, however, it was denied by general manager Sandy Alderson that a trade had taken place. "There is no trade, and unfortunately social media, etc.

got ahead of the facts and may have had adverse effects on one of the players rumored to be involved," Alderson said. A reporter from the New York Daily News was so certain that this trade was happening, he had released who the Brewers would be getting in return for Gomez and everything. Although the news wasn't intended to be false, this was a prime example of why it's always important to have not only good sources but a good relationship with the team a reporter covers so that inside personnel can confirm team news.

As sports journalism continues to expand, readers and reporters must make sure they know who their sources are. It is so easy to believe anything sports-related, especially on social media, but in reality, many people love to spread fake news. They love to upset rival teams and make them think that their star player is out the year with an injury, or that they traded their best player to a rival team. Source credibility is huge when it comes to journalism, and it will continue to be a major factor when it comes to picking who to believe. The topics of competition, anonymity and financial burdens will continue to come up in the idea of credibility, but reporters will need to continue providing their readers with honest information.

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Interview Questions for Mr. Rob Demovsky
ESPN NFL Nation Reporter for the Green Bay Packers
10/14/2019
Source Credibility

1. With your job, sources are a vital factor in providing updates and news on injuries, trades, contracts, etc. How do you determine which sources are credible?

"I go off of trust, how long I have known the source, if they are known to be reliable, and if they have proven to report credible information in the past"

2 types - sources with name (more trustworthy) and sources without name (anonymous)

- Anon - why is this person telling you this - trust/relationship

For example, Person in Packers says AR12 tears ACL - would he know this info?

-The person is anonymous because they are not authorized to give out information. Often times a player's agent, someone that works for the team, or even a family member

2. Are there any certain ways you check your sources for credibility? Or do you have sources that you know provide true and honest information?

- "I have the sources that I know will always be reliable"

-Although, for example, when the Packers had a whole new coaching staff this season, it was important to build relationships with those coaches to have them also be credible sources.

"It's important to build connections with your sources"

"When someone tells you something that you've never heard from before, that's when you find that they're credible"

-Even bad sources make mistakes - even the most credible ones

3. Has being a reporter made you a credible source? Do people ever not believe what you have to say?

Yes - "I don't think I've ever been wrong on a major thing"

-it definitely helps to work for a major sports network - automatically gain recognition

A lot of things are speculation, in order to be credible, you have to pick and choose and make sure your information is correct.

4. Who are your “sources”? I know, a lot of the time, you or other reporters always say “per source” but what does that mean? Are there people hired to only find out information as quickly as possible?

-sources are usually agents, team officials, players themselves

People are anon, meaning they are referred to as “per source”, because they’re not supposed to be sharing this information (trades, injuries, free agent signings, etc.)

What motivates somebody to reveal information?

People are not hired just to be a source, rather they release information as fast as it becomes available to them.

5. How do you/sources determine what is important to release? Are you aware of any situations where even your best source is wrong?

“As long as the information is credible, it is usually released. Sources are about competition, so you want to be the first to report on big news.”

-It’s important to double-check your own sources “sometimes they take information and make assumptions”

6. A lot of sources in the NFL report on injuries and trades. How is this information found out so quickly, and since it is reported so quickly, how is it deemed as accurate?

-Agents, teams, players “all kinds of motivation for people to share information”

“People that have knowledge are only one or two people that know this information”

7. Has there ever been a time when you reported news that you thought was true that ended up being false? How did it affect you and your ability to provide true information to your followers?

“My bosses would not be happy if I put out a report that was wrong”

Not only do you have to make sure your sources are right but also so that the public gets the right information, and you don't get in trouble

8. Seeing as you are one of the main reporters for the Packers, is it difficult to pick and choose what you want to report?

-I know a lot of people on Twitter and social media won't believe what you have to say, even if it's word for word from the locker room.

“Everyone tries to get the information, the best information, first”

“It's a game we play where we're trying to be the only ones with information and so that others have to cite us”

“It's important to be the first source so that others have to cite what you said in their own reports”

9. Even though you work behind the scenes in the locker room and are almost always with the team, do sources ever beat you to the information? How do they find out before you?

-It all depends on where you are and what is available to you

-For example, the other day I was in the locker room, and Aaron Jones was surrounded by cameras, I waited for the crowd to leave, so I was alone, and I was able to ask him different questions than the big crowd asked. Then I was able to create a story with information that nobody else had, and they had to credit me.

Asking Aaron Jones if he got fined for waving to the Cowboys defensive player and for throwing the ball into the stands to his twin brother.

10. I read that three sources of credibility are clarity, accuracy, and trustworthiness. Do you follow these, and are there other factors you follow?

“For credibility, would this person have access to this information”

"it's always trustworthiness"

"We'll report something and then the local TV people report it as their own"

"The most important part of my job is to tell people that they didn't previously know"

"You have to have sources that are trustworthy, it is the lifeblood of our job to have good sources"

"I don't know that there's a great catchall answer, but a lot of it is experience"

-Working for ESPN definitely helps

-Makes your job a more recognizable thing, people will assume you report reliable information

"I still call people trying to hear information and never hear back, even working for ESPN the callback percentage is around 50% when I worked for the Press Gazette the percentage was closer to 30%".

"People don't want to be a source"