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The Evolution of "The Toy Department": A Content Analysis of Newspaper Sports Sections Since 1956

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Abstract  
This paper presents an analysis of sports sections in eight metropolitan newspapers over six decades, from 1956 until 2006. Results demonstrated that newspapers devoted more space to sports, although a slight decrease (perhaps due to increased popularity of the Internet) was noted in 2006. Newspapers also used more locally
written articles on their section front. Spectator sports coverage increased over the period, at the expense of participant sports.

Introduction
There is debate on when newspapers first started drawing readers through lively sports sections. Some credit the innovation to William Randolph Hearst, while others see it as a feature adopted by several publishers, including Hearst. The sports section augmented sports' influence on society at the turn of the 20th Century. The mid-century introduction of television, however, initiated a cycle of change in audience media consumption. The diffusion of the Internet in the 1990s brought about yet another change that continues to affect the newspaper sports page.

So where have these new media left the sports section? This paper seeks to help answer that question by looking at newspaper sports sections in eight metropolitan newspapers over a 50-year period, from 1956 to 2006 — a time of great change for both newspapers and sports. Several underlying industry factors have affected newspapers during this period: changes in ownership patterns, from private to public; transitions in population density from rural to urban to suburban areas; and increased competition for advertising dollars. The role of sport in American life has changed as well, and television has exerted great influence on that change. This chapter in an ongoing study can help scholars determine how newspaper sports coverage has changed over this period.

Literature Review
Sports journalism first captured the attention of readers in the 1820s and 1830s, but through magazines, not newspapers. Popular titles included *Bell's Life in London* (founded in 1821), *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine* (1829), and *Spirit of the Times* (1831), the most widely read sports magazine of the period. Later in the century, readers flocked to Richard Kyle Fox's weekly tabloid, the *Police Gazette*, whose lurid content included the most aggressive sports coverage of the era, which helped the tabloid periodical reach an average circulation of 150,000. As the 19th century drew to a close, newspaper publishers were recognizing the value of a sports section in increasing circulation. Charles Dana of the *New York Sun*, Pulitzer and in particular Hearst were among the most aggressive in building and promoting sports coverage.

By the 1920s, sports played a key role in newspaper circulation strategy. As W. P. Beazell, managing editor of the *New York World*, said in 1929, "There is no single classification of news that sells more papers than sports." The approach of a heavyweight championship match increased circulation and sports section size even more. Damon Runyon of the *New York American* recognized his responsibility as a highly paid sportswriter: "If a sports writer can't help circulation, he isn't worth a dime." Even as economic depression reduced the overall number of pages in newspapers, sports maintained a steady proportion, reflecting readers' continued interest.

Following World War II, the advent of television initiated a flattening of newspaper circulation, but in sports, the two media established a complementary relationship. With television providing the game information to fans, newspapers focused less on game reports and more on analytical articles and on human-interest features. In survey after survey in the 1970s, newspaper readers asked that more space be devoted to sports, and considered sports coverage to be an attribute of a quality newspaper. By the early 1980s, sports editors were reporting that their newspapers were devoting more space to sports coverage and that the quality of sports writing had improved, but that their sports section was not devoting more space to local coverage. Related research looked at such specific issues as gender issues related to sports photos and the length of leads, but did not address broader topics related to the sports section as a whole.
Later in the 1980s, in an effort to increase readership among women, newspapers were hiring more women and debating whether to devote more space to health and fitness articles. Newspaper sports departments were also addressing the lack of minority sportswriters. As one strategy to slow circulation declines, newspaper publishers reported devoting more space to sports and hiring more people to report it, particularly high school sports. As early as 1991, the New York Times had increased the space devoted to sports by 50 percent, and its sports staff by 10 percent. Within a few years, the Times, long a holdout from having separate sports sections, was starting a separate run for sports, with pictures in color.

As of the late 1990s, the Internet’s effects were beginning to emerge. Nevertheless, sports coverage in newspapers was at an all time high, with newspapers willing to pay top salaries for the best sports reporters. Some newspapers, such as the Washington Times, had converted their Sunday issues almost entirely to sports. After the turn of the century, however, sports sections began to plateau and decline in print versions. Recognizing the challenges posed by new media, one writer warned as early as 2001 that sports sections must change as both reader interests and television coverage change. Another change was that even more sports information was found on the Internet — however, the Internet most often contained access to articles that were found in the print version, as newspapers also put their stories online.

The sports section in a digital culture faces many challenges, even as sports interest continues. Professional golf and tennis associations became much stricter regarding background checks for press members to cover its events. Journalists were denied credentials to a golf tournament in Hawaii unless they handed over to the Ladies Professional Golf Association rights to any pictures their photographers took.

Beyond security considerations, sports organizations also tightened access to their resources for financial reasons. Many well-known sports journalists accepted buyouts from newspapers seeking to cut costs, and moved on to high-profile television, magazine and Internet jobs: Tony Kornheiser (Washington Post) to ESPN, Selena Roberts (New York Times) to Sports Illustrated, and J. A. Andande (Los Angeles Times) to ESPN.com. The abundance of sites providing instant stats, from both sports teams and online services, seemed to undermine the newspaper’s traditional role of providing game-day reports, though some felt the need for insightful reporting remained, even in an Internet age. The debate and change is familiar to sports editors; it has been a part of newspaper sports journalism from the beginning.

Methodology

In his seminal book Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities, Holsti noted the usefulness of trend inventories “for identifying major changes across long periods of time.” To trace the evolution of sports sections over a 50-year period, the researchers selected a sample of eight metropolitan newspapers: the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the Chicago Tribune, the Dallas Morning News, the Los Angeles Times, the Milwaukee Journal, the New York Times, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the San Diego Union-Tribune. The newspapers were selected because they reflect a variety of regional metropolitan areas and demographic changes over the period. Also, the coding project included information relating to coverage of professional sports, and all eight newspapers are located in cities that host professional sports franchises. The availability of microfilm for these newspapers was not a minor factor.

A sample of twelve weeks — two separate weeks, six months apart, from the same year in each decade — were identified. From each decade, the year ending in the same digit was selected: 1956, 1966, 1976, 1986, 1996, and 2006. At the time the analysis was planned, 2006 was the most recent complete year, and the researchers worked backward from there, a decade at a time. Atlanta and San Diego were served by two major newspapers that merged into a single newspaper during this period. In those cases, the pre-merger newspaper with the
higher circulation was included in the earlier coding. In multi-newspaper markets, the newspaper was selected based on its survival until the final year of the study.

The newspapers allowed for an additional layer of analysis. Four of the newspapers in the study (Chicago Tribune, Milwaukee Journal, New York Times, St. Louis Post-Dispatch) were in cities with established professional sports franchises in baseball, basketball, and football, while the four other newspapers (Atlanta Constitution, Dallas Morning News, Los Angeles Times, and San Diego Union-Tribune) were in cities that had only one franchise between them in 1956 (the National Football League Los Angeles Rams), but eventually added expansion franchises in all four major sports. When appropriate, the two categories will be compared.

The decision resulted in a sample of fourteen sports sections per newspaper for each year. According to Stempel, a sample size of twelve newspapers within a given year produced adequate results for most such analyses, and increasing the sample size beyond twelve did not increase accuracy. The months were systematically varied so that one month (and, by consequence, one seasonal sport) did not overwhelm the analysis. As a result, each calendar month was included in the study once. The dates within each month were also systematically varied. The decisions resulted in the eight newspapers being studied within the following weeks: January 11-17, 1956; July 10-16, 1956; June 16-22, 1966; December 15-21, 1966; May 21-27, 1976; November 20-26, 1976; April 24-30, 1986; October 25-31, 1986; March 1-7, 1996; September 1-7, 1996; February 5-11, 2006; and August 6-12, 2006.

Microfilms of each newspaper for the dates of the study were obtained through interlibrary loan. Because the variables measured were at the descriptive level and not interpretive, each section was coded only once. Coders mostly relied on the page count within the front-page flag to determine the total number of pages for that day. When that information was not available, they counted the total pages themselves. Sports pages were counted by the coders. When a full-page ad ran at the end of the sports section, it was not included in the sports section page count.

To measure trends in use of photographs, the coders counted the number of photographs in two categories: one-column and larger than one-column. To examine the use of locally written articles on the front section page, coders noted whether each article on the page was written by a staff writer for the newspaper or originated from a wire service or newspaper syndicate. (Columns were not included.) To discern trends in coverage of participant sports vs. spectator and prep sports, coders counted bylined articles by newspaper staff members, then noted whether the article was about spectator sports, participant sports, or high school (i.e., "prep") sports.

The following hypotheses were tested:

H1. Reflecting the increased interest in sports, the proportion of pages devoted to sports would increase over the period.
H2. Reflecting developments in layouts and photographic reproduction, the proportion of large photographs would increase over the period.
H3. Reflecting the increase in size and expertise of sports staffs, the proportion of front-page articles written by staff sports writers would increase.
H4. Reflecting the increased emphasis on participant and high school sports, the proportion of spectator sports articles would decrease.

Splitting the newspaper samples into established vs. expansion sports franchise cities allowed a comparison concerning the growth of their respective sports sections and their reliance on locally written articles on the
front page of sports. In the absence of previous research to guide a hypothesis, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1. Does the fact that a newspaper's city gained expansion sports franchises over this period affect the growth of the sports section in any way?
RQ2. Does the fact that a newspaper's city gained expansion sports franchises over this period affect its use of locally written articles on the front page?

Results
A total of 671 sports sections were coded. The hypotheses and research questions were tested through a series of one-way ANOVAs, with the year of publication as the factor. Over the period of the study, the average number of pages for the newspapers increased between 1956 and 1986, and then decreased slightly.

The number of sports pages was divided by the total number of pages to determine the proportion of pages devoted to sports. Then, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed with the proportion of pages devoted to sports as the dependent variable. The ANOVA demonstrated a significant difference in the proportion of pages devoted to sports over the years. The proportion increased each decade between 1956 and 1996 before decreasing in 2006. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported.

When the sample of sports sections was split into samples from expansion franchise cities vs. established franchise cities, a surprising distinction emerged. The sports sections in the four expansion city newspapers exceeded the sections in the four established cities in terms of proportion devoted to sports, for every decade in the study. The established city sports sections showed a consistent increase throughout the period, while expansion city sports sections began to decrease in 1986, though it remained above the proportion for established cities throughout the period.

To test Hypothesis 2, a one-way ANOVA was performed with the percentage of large photographs as the dependent variable. The proportion of large photographs (larger than one-column) varied between a high of 61 percent in 1956 and a low of 53 percent in 1986. Neither a consistent trend nor a significant difference was detected, however. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

The number of locally written articles leading the sports section increased over the period. A one-way ANOVA was performed with the percentage of locally written front-page articles as the dependent variable. In 1956, fewer than half of the lead-page articles carried staff bylines; by 2006, the number had increased to more than ninety percent. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Table 1. Average pages per newspaper by decade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>AVERAGE PAGES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>85.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>110.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>124.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>150.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>148.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>143.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Average percentage of newspaper pages devoted to sports by decade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>AVERAGE PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


When the sample was split into the existing franchise and expansion franchise subsets, a large difference emerges. Local coverage on the front page started lower but increased at a significantly higher rate in the expansion franchise cities, from 38 percent in 1956 to 99 percent in 2006. For newspapers in established franchise cities, the increase was steadier, from 57 percent in 1956 to 87 percent in 2006.

Finally, despite calls for greater emphasis on participant sports, the percentage of participant sport articles actually decreased during the period, and the percentage of spectator sport articles increased. The main decrease in participant sports coverage, however, appeared to be in outdoor articles (hunting and fishing). The percentage of prep sports articles did not vary significantly.

**Discussion**

This analysis of the evolution of sports pages from 1956 to 2006 reflected the changes that affected sports media during the period. The trend in proportion of pages devoted to sports showed that television did not draw readers away from newspapers, as some might have feared. Instead, the data reveal an increased interest in sports between 1956 and 1996. Even the rapid expansion of sports on cable television did not reverse this trend. Far from replacing newspapers, first broadcast and then cable television developed an interest in sports among readers that newspaper publishers sought to capitalize on.

The trend held true whether the newspaper was located in a city that had major professional sports franchises for decades, or whether it was located in a city that only recently been awarded such franchises. It is intuitive to assume that the arrival of a professional sports franchise would increase sports page interest. Based on this study's findings, however, it is more likely that several factors — fan interest, media interest, and economic promise — interacted to create a situation that was promising for prospective franchise owners.

By 1996, the impact of the Internet was beginning to be felt. Before, broadcasting provided the images and newspapers provided the written information. Ten years later, the proportion declined for the first time, as sports fans found such information conveniently online. Perhaps newspaper publishers recognized that and began to devote their resources there, away from print.
At the same time, newspapers have been devoting more human resources to the task of sports writing. This is reflected by the prominence that newspapers have given to articles written by their own staff writers — prominence earlier given to wire service articles. This could also reflect the sports section's increased emphasis on local coverage. Newspapers featured local events by local reporters on the front page, with national sports news mainly moved to inside pages. That the trend would continue is not surprising, since many of these writers also provide Web content, which is also local in focus.

The lack of emphasis on participant sports articles could be an area of concern. Perhaps the participant sports articles are being printed in newspapers but do not appear on the sports page. Many newspapers have increased health and fitness coverage in their features sections, which historically have higher readership among females. Such articles, in other newspaper sections, were not tracked within this study. Even so, it would seem

Table 4. Average percentage of locally written articles on the front sports page, by decade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>AVERAGE PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>47.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>59.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>70.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>88.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>89.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>92.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 667, F = 77.263, p < .001

Table 5. Average percentage of locally written articles on the front sports page, by decade: expansion vs. established cities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>AVERAGE PERCENTAGE EXPANSION CITIES</th>
<th>AVERAGE PERCENTAGE ESTABLISHED CITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>38.18</td>
<td>56.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>59.25</td>
<td>59.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>63.55</td>
<td>76.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>95.80</td>
<td>81.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>96.82</td>
<td>83.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>98.48</td>
<td>86.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 667, F = 12.559, p < .001

Table 6. Percentage of article topics, by decade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>SPECTATOR SPORT ARTICLES*</th>
<th>PARTICIPANT SPORT ARTICLES**</th>
<th>PREP SPORTS ARTICLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>74.20</td>
<td>16.48</td>
<td>6.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>86.18</td>
<td>8.91</td>
<td>4.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>86.77</td>
<td>6.42</td>
<td>4.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>91.08</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>89.69</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>6.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>89.40</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>7.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N = 668, F = 12.568, p < .001  
**N = 668, F = 16.144, p < .001
that a better way to reach sports fans — long criticized for being "couch potatoes," would be to publish such articles within the sports sections they read so regularly.

The increase in the percentage of pages given to sports begs the question: Which section lost pages so that sports could increase? This provides one focus for future research, and additional insights as to where newspapers are shifting their resources from, as they direct more of their pages to sports.

For deeper understanding of the trends affecting sports sections, qualitative methods could be paired with the quantitative methods used in this study. Intensive interviews with sports editors and newspaper publishers could yield additional insight into the reasons behind the changes. Also, this study focused on larger newspapers in metropolitan areas. Has this trend been noted in mid-sized and small dailies, or in smaller community newspapers that publish less frequently?

Many newspaper industry observers are predicting great changes in sports journalism, as the Internet and other media attract more and more readers away from traditional print media. News and other content forms will be transmitted through a variety of media. As this study demonstrates, whatever forms emerge for news media, sports will remain a popular choice of news consumers.

Notes
23. "Golf and Tennis Associations Background Checks for Journalists are Too Intrusive." The Quill 90, no. 6 (July/August 2002): S6.
29. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch did not publish a newspaper on Thanksgiving Day (November 25) 1976.
30. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch was excluded from this statistical test because it had adopted a tabloid format by 2006, artificially inflating its page count. It was included in subsequent comparisons that involved proportions of page counts.