ABSTRACT

THE WORLDWIDE LEADER TAKES ON THE FINAL FRONTIER: 
AN EARLY ANALYSIS OF ESPN’S LOCAL SPORTS 
WEB SITES IN CHICAGO AND BOSTON

This study analyzes the content of ESPNBoston.com and 
ESPNChicago.com compared to that of the Chicago Tribune’s 
Chicagosports.com and the Boston Globe’s boston.com/sports 
using agenda setting as a theoretical framework. ESPN’s 
agenda in local sports coverage may differ from the Tribune 
and Globe sites and therefore may have an effect on sports 
coverage in those cities if its sites gain widespread 
popularity. The study found that ESPN’s agenda was focused 
on major professional sports, while the newspapers focused 
on sports at every level in their regions. At this point, 
it cannot be determined how successful ESPN will be in its 
attempt to wrestle market share of local sports coverage 
from each city’s newspapers.

John Haisten Willis, Jr.
December 2010
THE WORLDWIDE LEADER TAKES ON THE FINAL FRONTIER:
AN EARLY ANALYSIS OF ESPN’S LOCAL SPORTS WEB SITES IN CHICAGO AND BOSTON

by

John Haisten Willis, Jr.

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Mass Communication and Journalism in the College of Arts and Humanities California State University, Fresno

December 2010
APPROVED

For the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism:

We, the undersigned, certify that the thesis of the following student meets the required standards of scholarship, format, and style of the university and the student's graduate degree program for the awarding of the master's degree.

John Haisten Willis, Jr.
Thesis Author

Kelley McCoy (Chair)  Mass Communication and Journalism

Reaz Mahmood  Mass Communication and Journalism

Tamyra Pierce  Mass Communication and Journalism

For the University Graduate Committee:

Dean, Division of Graduate Studies
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my parents, first and foremost, for raising me in a secure and healthy environment, for reading to me as a child, and for always telling me to follow my dreams (even when they were found on the other side of the country). I am indebted as well to Dr. Kelley McCoy, who had the kind heart to allow me to write this thesis in a location of my choosing and for corresponding with me through endless months and drafts of my work. Reaz Mahmood and Dr. Tamyra Pierce deserve much credit for serving as chair people. Tamyra was the person who introduced me to Fresno State and was responsible for my attending this institution for my graduate studies. Reaz was instrumental in my selection of quantitative content analysis as a means of measurement. Thank you all so much.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.................................................................................. vii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION................................................................. 1
   ESPN: A Potential New Challenge .................................................... 2
   Purpose, Scope, and Significance ...................................................... 4

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW..................................................... 6
   ESPN .......................................................................................... 9
   Agenda Setting and ESPN ............................................................. 14
   Establishing a Local Online Presence .......................................... 16
   Case Studies: ESPN Versus the Chicago Tribune and the Boston Globe .......................................................... 19
   Differences in Agenda .................................................................. 24
   Research Questions ..................................................................... 25

CHAPTER 3: METHODS....................................................................... 27
   Sample ....................................................................................... 28
   Units of Analysis ....................................................................... 28
   Procedures ................................................................................ 31

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS....................................................................... 33
   RQ1: What Is the Content of the ESPN Websites in Boston and Chicago? ......................................................... 33
   RQ2: What Is the Content of the Boston Globe’s Sports Website? .................................................................. 35
   RQ3: What Is the Content of the Chicago Tribune’s Sports Website? ................................................................. 35
   RQ4: In What Ways Is the Content of These Websites Similar? .................................................................... 36
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1.</td>
<td>Media Type</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.</td>
<td>Sources per Story/Column (Combined)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.</td>
<td>Minutes per Video</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.</td>
<td>Competition Level</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.</td>
<td>NHL, MLS, AFL</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

While it may seem to be a recent phenomenon, newspapers, on the whole, have been in decline for nearly 100 years. Once the only way to receive daily news, with each wave of new technology – the telegraph, radio, television, and, most recently, the Internet – the newspaper industry has decreased in size as it becomes less central to the dissemination of news (Gavin, 2005; Heyboer & Revah, 1995; Shepherd 2009;). Consider, for example, that at one time it was common for major cities to have five or more daily newspapers. Now, all but the largest cities are served by only one paper (Perigoe, 2009). Newspapers are increasingly becoming known as a medium that reports “yesterday’s news” (Perigoe, 2009).

Largely in response to the growing preference of audiences to access news and information online, newspapers have established websites, and turned to social media such as Facebook and Twitter to facilitate interaction with readers (Entman, 1993). To an extent, these strategies have been successful. The New York Times, for example, currently attracts 90% of its readers through its website (Karp, 2007). At the same time, online content draws significantly less advertising revenue than printed content, resulting in what has been called the “10 percent problem.” While the online edition of the New York Times may draw 90% of its
readers, it generates only 10% of its ad revenue. For newspapers, the most pressing question is how to find a model that is profitable. Attempts to charge for content online have failed (Karp, 2007). Meanwhile, ever more readers are turning to the Internet, and ad revenues continue to fall, threatening more layoffs and newspaper closures in the future.

**ESPN: A Potential New Challenge**

A new venture by ESPN (acronym for the Entertainment in Sports Programming Network) may have the potential to further threaten newspapers. In April 2009, ESPN launched its first local sports website, ESPNChicago.com. Within 1 month ESPNChicago.com was attracting more visitors than the Chicago Tribune’s sports website (Lowry, 2009). It has since started similar sites in Boston, Dallas, Los Angeles, Miami, and New York City, and has expressed interest in eventually having a local site in every major city in the United States and abroad (Atkinson, 2009).

While ESPN focuses expressly on sports coverage, it is conceivable that cable news giants (such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC) would follow with their own local news websites if the model proves to be profitable, thus filling the void left by newspapers. This would bring the news industry in line with other industries (food service, shoes, soft drinks) that have come to be dominated at all levels by
national and international corporations (McDonalds, Nike, Coca-Cola) (McDowell, 2004). This has already happened on the national level and, to an extent, on the local level as newspaper ownership has been held by a shrinking number of companies over the last few decades (Cole & Hamilton, 2008).

Should ESPN come to dominate the local sports market, it could have what is essentially a top-down monopoly on the sports media market. The danger of this scenario lies in the inherent power that comes with disseminating news (McCombs, 2004). This is especially true for ESPN. While cable news is dominated by CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, sports coverage at the national level is almost completely monopolized by ESPN (Evey & Broughton, 2004). Moreover, ESPN has been known to invest in certain sports leagues it feels have a large growth potential (Chung, 2007).

For the Chicago Tribune and the Boston Globe, the first newspapers to have to compete with ESPN at the local level, the fight will be about survival rather than expansion. Currently, newspapers are attempting to stay relevant in the sports world by covering local colleges and high schools (Malone, 2009). The users who check these sites for the scores of college and high school games have, in turn, driven up the number of page views for other sections of the papers’ websites.
Clearly, both ESPN and the newspapers will be covering sports in Chicago and Boston. However, it is possible that there will be differences in what specific sports the network and the newspapers cover and how they cover them. ESPN may focus more on videos because it has historically done so. The newspapers may focus on written content because they have historically done so. In addition, ESPN may focus on sports that are shown on its networks, while the newspapers may focus on sports that are not covered by ESPN.

The potentially adverse agenda ESPN has for its local sports venture is the most pressing issue in the pending coverage war between the media giant and local newspapers. Therefore, agenda setting will be the theoretical framework guiding this research.

Agenda-setting theory holds that the mass media have a large influence on audiences by choosing what stories to consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space to give them (McCombs, 2004).

**Purpose, Scope, and Significance**

With the aforementioned as points of departure, this study looks at how ESPN and local newspapers approach local sports coverage. Using quantitative content analysis for a period of 2 weeks, the study measures where coverage is centered and how much coverage is produced daily by
ESPNChicago.com, ESPNBoston.com, Chicagosports.com, and Boston.com/sports. Of concern is ESPN’s role in the fall of local newspapers and its potential to put them out of business entirely. If the ESPN sites replace newspaper sports sections, it could affect sports fans not only in Chicago and Boston, but in every major city in entire United States.

This study comprises five chapters. This chapter introduced the nature of the problem and outlined the purpose and scope of the research. The next chapter presents the conceptual framework and relevant issues of the study by reviewing the major literature in the field. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodology used to perform the study, and chapter 4 presents the results of the analysis. Finally, chapter 5 summarizes the findings and limitations of the study and suggests directions for future research on the subject.
Media effects have been a central concern of researchers since the 1940s and 1950s, when television emerged as a dominant source of news and information (McCombs, 2004). One of the most viable and enduring theories used to explain the power of media is agenda setting. Agenda setting theory holds that media, especially large media companies, have the power to create news and convey to the public what is important to discuss at any given time (McCombs, 2004). The farther a conglomerate can reach in its coverage, the higher the potential to set an agenda.

McCombs identified four main components to agenda setting theory, including the media agenda, the public agenda, the policy agenda, and the corporate agenda. Each group’s agenda reflects the issues it deems important. For example, the media agenda generally involves trying to attract as many viewers and readers as possible to increase advertising revenue. These objectives affect how and what media cover.

The issues the public considers important are known as the public agenda. The corporate agenda is the issues corporations deem important. News companies hold a unique place at the intersection of the media agenda, corporate agenda, and public agenda. A critical factor in the media’s
ability to set the public agenda is the level of trust afforded to a source (Matsaganis & Payne, 2005).

Research has shown that the media agenda tends to closely mirror the public agenda (McCombs, 2004). Agenda setting researchers have found that regardless of the medium, focusing on certain issues conveys a strong message to the audience about what is important (McCombs, 2004).

The idea of an agenda setting role of the press has its origins in Walter Lippman’s *Public Opinion*, first published in 1922. Lippman argued that the press shapes our mental conceptions of the larger world we never see directly. He further suggested that our behavior often reflects these incomplete pictures of the world.

Another seminal study by McCombs and Shaw, conducted during the 1968 presidential election, compared the agendas of nine news media in Chapel Hill, North Carolina used by voters there to follow the election. McCombs and Shaw found a strong correlation between the agendas of the public and the agendas of the press they subscribed to. They used the term *agenda setting* to describe the relationship. A similar result was found in a study conducted by David Weaver during the 1976 presidential election (McCombs, 2004).

Citizens should be concerned about the ability for the press to set agendas because it can affect their everyday lives. As Cohen (1963) argued, a press that decides what people think about can change the outcome of political
elections and business dealings. Therefore, agenda setting should be a concern of everyone who uses the media to learn about the world around them.

Widespread adoption rates are not yet available for ESPN’s local sports websites, so it is not yet possible to study the effect on the public agenda.

Subsets of agenda setting include priming and framing. Priming refers to the effect of a prior stimulus on a succeeding stimulus (Carpentier, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2002). In this case priming could involve a heavily-promoted sporting event seeming more important to consumers, increasing their likelihood of viewing or attending the event.

Framing influences how audiences think about issues (Entman, 1993). ESPN and newspapers frame events by focusing on certain parts of the action deemed the most important (“highlights”) and by choosing which aspects of a sporting event make headlines and receive the spotlight of a column. Because both serve as a summary of a large number of events that take place each day, framing is necessary to render content short enough for a newspaper story or television time slot.

Agenda setting in sports journalism has seldom been explored by academic researchers (DuBois, 2008). This lack of attention may be due to the relatively trivial nature of sports compared to other subjects, such as politics.
However, considering that the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) has emerged as one of the largest American cable television networks in existence, is owned by the largest media and entertainment conglomerate in the world, and has exerted considerable dominance in pushing its media agenda in the area of sports coverage nationally and globally, its corporate agenda, as well as the corporate agenda of its competitors, is worthy of being studied. This will be manifested by the content of ESPN’s local sports web sites measured against the content of its competitors.

**ESPN**

ESPN was launched on Sept. 7, 1979. Founded by Scott Rasmussen and Bill Rasmussen and funded by the Getty Oil Company, it was the first all-sports cable television channel in the United States (Dunnavant, 2004).

The Rasmussens’ original idea for the new network was to cover Connecticut-area sports only. The father and son decided to pursue a national format when it was discovered that satellite broadcasts would be more cost-effective (Dunnavant, 2004).

While it had been speculated that a 24-hour cable sports channel would one day be a viable business enterprise, ESPN began with little venture capital. It struggled to fill its air time in the early years and was
forced to show obscure sporting events such as Australian rules football and softball on weekends when the major networks were covering popular, revenue-generating sports heavily (Dunnavant, 2004). The now-iconic television program *SportsCenter* was, fittingly, the first program to ever air on the network.

The network secured a contract with the National Basketball Association (NBA) from 1982-1984, but it was canceled soon thereafter. The first sports broadcasting contract which benefitted both the league and ESPN was with the United States Football League (USFL) (Dunnavant, 2004). The success of this relationship was due in large part to the fact that the USFL was launched soon after ESPN debuted and games were not shown on the major networks, except for occasional broadcasts on ABC.

While the NBA and USFL helped to establish ESPN as a viable outlet for sports coverage, it was the landmark arrival of the National Football League (NFL) in 1987 that truly established the network’s presence on the American sports landscape (Dunnavant, 2004). The league stipulated that the games had to be simulcast in the local markets the teams were playing in, but this was not a factor for ESPN due to the immense popularity of the league.

Once the network secured the NFL as a client, ESPN began rapidly acquiring contracts with the other major sports leagues. It added Major League Baseball in 1990 and
the National Hockey League in 1993 (Dunnavant, 2004). In addition, it added extensive coverage of the NFL in the form of pre-game and post-game coverage. It also covered the NFL draft, bringing the average fan much more NFL coverage than was previously available and, to an extent, making the NFL dependent on ESPN for exposure (Carter, 1998).

By the early 1990s, the stage was set for rapid expansion of the network. The first breakaway venture from the original cable channel was ESPN International (covering Latin America and Asia, but avoiding the tougher European market), followed by ESPN2 in the United States (Cuneo, 2008). ESPN.com, the network’s website, was launched in 1995. ESPNews emerged in 1996 as a 24-hour broadcast of SportsCenter. In 1997 the company purchased a cable channel, the Classic Sports Network, and renamed it ESPN Classic. It also purchased minority shares in the Canadian sports networks TSN and RDS and changed their logos to closely resemble the ESPN logo. The ESPN Zone, a restaurant chain, was launched in 1998. Also that year, the company launched ESPN The Magazine to compete directly with the long-established Sports Illustrated (Bachman, 2005).

Amidst this flurry of activity and expansion, the company, which had been purchased by ABC in 1984, began to be closely associated with ABC Sports and, by extension, with ABC itself, both of which were acquired by the Disney
Corporation (Dunnavant, 2004). In 1996, Disney merged with ABC/Capital Cities in a $19-billion deal (Bagdikian, 1997). Steve Bornstein, president of ESPN, was soon named president of ABC Sports as well. The companies’ sales divisions were combined in 1999. As a result of these developments, sporting events which are broadcast on ABC are now branded as “ESPN on ABC” and, in 2006, Monday Night Football was moved to ESPN (Dunnavant, 2004).

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 also played a part in the expansion of ESPN. The act essentially deregulated the industry, which had a colossal effect on the number of media companies controlling different types of media. The total number of major media companies shrunk from around 50 in 1984 to around 10 in the mid 1990s (Bagdikian, 1997).

These events led to speculation about ESPN becoming too powerful, and concern that the network was influencing the sports it covered. Indeed, some have argued that the rapid decline of the National Hockey League after its 2004 strike may have been due in part to ESPN deciding to stop covering the league (Stilson, 2007).

One criticism of the network concerns its recent acquisition of some of the United States’ most popular sporting events. When Monday Night Football was moved from over-the-air channel ABC to ESPN, the change brought one of the highest-rated shows in all of television to cable, effectively locking out millions of homes without cable TV
from viewing the games. In 2008, ESPN acquired the rights to the college football national championship game, beginning in 2011, marking the first time a major American sports championship final will be broadcast on cable television. These two moves have been criticized by viewers and rival networks because they will allow ESPN to charge cable providers a higher fee per subscriber, a fee that is already the highest in cable television. This fee generates billions of dollars in revenue that is unavailable to over-the-air television. The fee has been cited as the very reason the network was able to outbid Fox for the college football championship game in the first place (Lasswell, 2008).

Similarly, ESPN has forced the hand of cable operators by placing prominent games on its new networks soon after they launch. Following the launch of ESPN2, the channel broadcast a basketball game between Duke and North Carolina. Shortly thereafter, cable television companies received a flurry of calls from consumers asking that the channel be added to basic subscriber packages (Dunnavant, 2004). A similar event occurred in 2006 after the launch of ESPNU, a channel focusing expressly on college sports. When the 2006 Louisville-Kentucky football game was broadcast on the fledgling network, thousands of complaint calls flooded a Louisville cable operator, who reluctantly agreed to add
ESPNU to its subscriber package as a result (Michael, 2006).

ESPN is estimated to be worth about 40% of Disney’s total value. It broadcasts more than 10 separate channels in more than 150 countries on every continent in the world except for Antarctica, and is generally considered one of the greatest business success stories of the last 30 years (Dunnavant, 2004). It is rivaled by a very small number of competitors on a global level, and even fewer in the United States. ESPN.com outstrips rival sites such as CBSsports.com and Foxsports.com by several million hits each month (Weprin & Atkinson, 2009). Finally, its flagship program, SportsCenter, suggests what is important for sports fans to know by selecting which highlights will be shown each night during the show’s 1-hour running time.

**Agenda Setting and ESPN**

While all media outlets engage in agenda setting by definition, researchers and columnists have accused ESPN of abusing its influence in recent years (Lowry, 2009). Specifically, these accusations involve ESPN’s coverage of Major League Soccer (MLS) and the National Hockey League (NHL), and its purchasing a minority share of the Arena Football League (AFL). With the network directly invested in these leagues it would profit from their success. ESPN
then had a motive to set an agenda for fans to watch the MLS and AFL.

ESPN was criticized for its coverage of Major League Soccer when the league landed international superstar David Beckham in 2007 (Chung, 2007). Despite soccer’s relative lack of popularity in the United States, ESPN heavily covered the signing and MLS games involving Beckham soon after his arrival. According to Chung (2007), this could be due to ESPN, which has covered MLS since its first season in 1996, having to pay its first-ever rights fees to televise the league in 2007. The main difference between the MLS matches before the rights fees and the ones after were that profits from them would now go to ESPN rather than MLS (Goff, 2007). ESPN even ran advertisements proclaiming, “You’re a soccer fan, you just don’t know it yet” (Chung, 2007). The result was doubled Nielsen ratings for MLS in the crucial 18- to 34-year-old demographic which, according to Chung, points to ESPN’s potential for agenda setting.

Stilson (2007) has argued that ESPN engaged in agenda setting when it purchased a minority share in the Arena Football League. This was done through expanded coverage of the league on ESPN’s networks and website. Additionally, Stilson found that ESPN’s coverage of the NHL decreased after it stopped broadcasting the league’s games in 2005.
Establishing a Local Online Presence

With the steady decline of the local newspaper industry during the latter part of the 2000s, it was perhaps inevitable that ESPN would establish local sports websites. The company was already in several local markets through ESPN Radio, and chose cities with ESPN Radio affiliates for its first round of localized sports websites (Lowry, 2009).

The first of these websites, ESPNChicago.com, was launched on April 13, 2009. Within 1 month, the site surpassed the Chicago Tribune’s site as the most visited sports site in the Chicago metropolitan area (Atkinson, 2009). John Kosner, ESPN’s vice-president of digital media, said the site exceeded initial audience projections by nearly 300%.

The popularity of the fledgling ESPN site is arguably indicative of the power of the ESPN brand because first-month visitors could not have been attracted by content alone at such an early stage. As a general manager at a station in a market not yet being targeted by ESPN said, “You don’t want them in your market. What’s so scary is that they’re such a trusted brand that they’ll get eyeballs no matter what they do” (Atkinson, 2009).

ESPN’s second localized site, ESPNBoston.com, launched on Sept. 14, 2009, and has had early success similar to that enjoyed by the Chicago site. A third site,
ESPNDallas.com, launched on Sept. 28, 2009. Sites in Los Angeles, New York, and Miami are set to launch in 2010, with more likely to follow in the future. One high-ranking ESPN official has said that the current sites are only the “first inning” of the company’s thrust into local markets (Lowry, 2009).

The sites currently feature archived stories from the main ESPN site as well as content taken from the local ESPN radio stations and ABC affiliates. One interesting feature of the sites is a 5-minute daily local version of ESPN’s flagship program, SportsCenter (Lowry, 2009). This may prove to be a key selling point for visitors who prefer to watch rather than read content.

Whether ESPNChicago.com and ESPNBoston.com provide more thorough and complete coverage than the Chicago Tribune and Boston Globe websites has been virtually unexplored. At the same time, their early success provides ample evidence that the ESPN name alone draws viewers. It also suggests that ESPN sites have the potential to set the agenda for local sports journalism.

Among the concerns of ESPN’s foray into local sports journalism is that the resulting coverage may be biased and of poorer quality. The question of media concentration in the sports world is essentially a question of ownership. Although newspapers and radio stations are being acquired by larger companies, there is still significant competition
and ideological differences between them. This is shown clearly by the Chicago Tribune’s ownership by the Tribune Company and the Boston Globe’s ownership by the New York Times.

**Biased Coverage**

Columnists in the United States often serve as opinion leaders (Crimmins, 1997). Local newspaper columnists have little incentive to cover any particular sport based on company affiliation other than writing about teams within that paper’s coverage area. However, an incentive may be present for columnists whose employer stands to profit from the success of certain sports leagues, as ESPN does. This could impede on the freedom of a columnist to write as he or she pleases.

**Lower Quality of Coverage**

Perhaps the most tangible effect of monopolization – and the easiest to identify – is the quality of coverage that suffers when local newspapers, television stations, and radio stations are taken over by corporations from other states or countries. Consolidation of media companies has increased greatly since the deregulation of the industry in the 1980s. This has led to a decrease in the amount and quality of local news coverage (McKean & Stone, 1992). Additionally, ESPN may use its local websites merely
as a way to archive information which is already being generated on its existing networks and websites.

While ultimately the success of either side will be decided by consumers, ESPN has many advantages which are not related to coverage quality. As mentioned before, the considerable trust in the ESPN brand is a major advantage which gave ESPNChicago.com more page views than Chicagosports.com in its first month of existence (Lowry, 2009).

Case Studies: ESPN Versus the Chicago Tribune and the Boston Globe

For the Chicago Tribune and the Boston Globe, the two publications most directly impacted by ESPN’s foray into local sports, the sports network’s venture could not have come at a worse time. The current challenges faced by the newspapers have followed an illustrious history that collectively span 160 years.

The Chicago Tribune

The Chicago Tribune was first published on June 10, 1847 (Jones, 2008). It is the flagship publication of the Tribune Company and the eighth-largest newspaper in the United States by circulation. The paper has won 25 Pulitzer Prizes despite refusing to participate in the competition for many years. Had the paper chosen to participate in the competition more often, it would likely have many more
Pulitzer Prizes. The Tribune won five Pulitzers during the past decade alone (Picard, 2008).

Most major newspapers today survived competition with rival publications. The Tribune once competed with The Examiner, run by Randolph Hearst, and won a quarter-million readers when its success forced that paper to cease operations. Chicago once had as many as eight daily newspapers. The Tribune survived by absorbing the other newspapers and quickly investing in technology which, at different periods in its history, including radio, television, and the Internet (Conboy & Steel, 2008).

The Chicago Tribune has also been a pioneer of the Internet. It acquired 10% of America Online in the early 1990s and has launched several Chicago-related websites over the years, including Chicagosports.com (Picard, 2008).

Layoffs have affected every major newspaper in the country, and the Chicago Tribune is no exception. Twenty-eight employees holding editorial positions were either laid off or bought out in 2005 (Conboy & Steel, 2008). Another 25 newsroom employees took buyouts in 2007, and more than 100 staff positions were eliminated in 2008. This trend continued in 2009, with about 80 additional positions removed in that year alone. Altogether, about 250 full-time positions that existed prior to 2005 no longer exist. Undoubtedly, such losses put the paper at a disadvantage when it comes to reporting and breaking news. In 2008, the
Tribune Company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy after a $128 million third-quarter loss.

The Tribune has long been a conservative newspaper, reflecting the general leanings of the Midwest as a region. Going as far back as the Temperance movement in the mid-1800s, the paper has aligned itself with the Republican Party. It endorsed President George W. Bush in 2004. However, the paper endorsed Democrat and Chicago resident Barack Obama in 2008 (Bellandi, 2008).

In 2007, the paper issued an editorial mission statement:

The Chicago Tribune believes in the traditional principles of limited government; maximum individual responsibility; minimum restriction of personal liberty, opportunity and enterprise. It believes in free markets, free will and freedom of expression. These principles, while traditionally conservative, are guidelines and not reflexive dogmas. (Chicago Tribune, Statement of principles, 2007)

The Tribune’s sports website, Chicagosports.com, was the number 1 sports site in the Chicago area until April 2009, drawing around 450,000 hits a month. By June 2009, ESPNChicago.com had taken over the lead position, drawing more than 500,000 hits that month (Lowry, 2009). Nevertheless, the Tribune’s site did not see a significant reduction in hits as a result of ESPNChicago.com’s
ascendancy. Some have suggested that ESPNChicago.com did not damage Chicagosports.com, it simply slowed its growth (Malone, 2009).

The Boston Globe

The first edition of the Boston Globe appeared on March 4, 1872 (Gavin, 2005). The Globe is currently the 18th-largest newspaper in the country by circulation and has won 18 Pulitzer Prizes, including five in the last decade alone. The newspaper was also a pioneer of the Internet, securing the Web domain Boston.com in 1995 (Karp, 2007).

Unlike the Chicago Tribune, which is owned by a company within its home state, The Globe is not a flagship newspaper; it has been owned by The New York Times Company since 1993 (Buccini, 2001).

Politically, the Globe is the opposite of the Chicago Tribune. The paper has a history of being politically liberal, reflecting the political views of the region surrounding it (Buccini, 2001). It published pictures of American soldiers purportedly raping Iraqi women in 2004, an editorial decision for which it later apologized. The paper was also critical of President George W. Bush during his tenure, and won a Pulitzer in 2007 for reports on his extensive use of signing statements. Signing statements are notes the president can make upon signing an act of congress. The Globe argued that George W. Bush’s extensive
signing statements were used to modify the meaning of the legislation being signed (Savage, 2007).

The Boston Globe has been impacted by layoffs in recent years. The paper announced it would lay off 50 employees in January 2009, including 29 who worked for Boston.com (Shepherd, 2009). The layoffs reflected the generally downward turn of the nation’s economy and newspapers. Given the large number of layoff notices given to online journalists in particular, the paper’s decisions also reflected a perspective held by media companies that Internet viewers are less important to advertisers than print subscribers (Karp, 2007). Overall, the paper has gone through five rounds of layoffs since 2001 (Shepherd, 2009).

The print circulation of the Globe fell 8.3% in 2008, to about 350,000. Sunday circulation fell 6.5% during the same period, to about 525,000. The New York Times Company threatened to stop publication of the Globe completely if the Globe would not agree to a $20 million cost reduction in 2009. These needs were apparently met as the threat was lifted later in the year (Adams, 2009).

Both the Chicago Tribune and the Boston Globe are among the few major daily newspapers in the country that still face competition from within their home cities. The Chicago Tribune faces internal competition from the Chicago Sun-Times, while the Boston Globe competes with the Boston Herald (Gavin, 2005; Reed, 2007).
Unlike newspapers with monopolies, these papers are accustomed to trying to break stories first and competing for interviews. In addition, the two newspapers in both cities could possibly merge and fight jointly against the impeding giant of ESPN.

Research has shown that sports columnists can draw readers to the same sports page on a consistent basis (Lowry, 2009). Both newspapers have had many award-winning columnists, and both have made a habit of hiring popular columnists away from city rivals to win new readers (Crimmins, 1997). The Chicago Tribune currently employs eight columnists who regularly contribute to its sports site (Chicagosports.com), while the Boston Globe employs three full-time columnists (Boston.com/sports).

**Differences in Agenda**

To predict what ESPN’s agenda for local coverage may be, it is probably best to look at its target audience. Previous research on large corporations expanding into smaller markets holds that they tend to go “wide but not deep” (McKean & Stone, 1992). Large companies will typically target the largest audience they can, which in ESPN’s case likely means fans of the “big four” sports leagues: the NFL, NHL, NBA, and MLB (Dunnivant, 2004). Covering these leagues ensures ESPN of generating interest from a large audience. In addition, it means ESPN will be
focusing on leagues whose games it already broadcasts. However, it also ignores local nuances which may exist from region to region.

For the Chicago Tribune and Boston Globe, the target audience is slightly different. As the typical reader of these papers grew up in the areas covered by them, there may be an incentive to cover local high school sports. This incentive may be even more pronounced now that newspapers have been reported as staying relevant by focusing on local sports (Lowry, 2009).

Similarly, newspapers in Boston and Chicago may have an agenda to cover local colleges. Both of these papers have been described as being the “upper class” newspapers in their cities, and therefore may count even more college alumni among its readership than local rivals the Chicago Sun-Times and the Boston Herald (Pasadeos & Paula, 1992). Additionally, staff writers for the newspapers may be more likely to be alumni of their cities’ colleges than ESPN journalists.

**Research Questions**

In light of the issues raised above, this case study examines the content of the four sports-related websites of ESPNChicago.com, ESPNBoston.com, Chicagosports.com, and Boston.com. Central concerns of this analysis are what types of sports stories the respective sites pay attention
to, what issues they have less interest in, and how their agendas compare with each other.

Five questions guide this research:

(RQ1) What is the content of the local ESPN websites in Boston and Chicago?

(RQ2) What is the content of the Boston Globe’s sports website?

(RQ3) What is the content of the Chicago Tribune’s sports website?

(RQ4) In what ways is the content of the local ESPN websites similar to the newspaper sports websites?

(RQ5) In what ways is the content of the local ESPN websites dissimilar to the newspaper sports websites?

The approach that was taken in an effort to begin answering these questions will be presented in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

A quantitative content analysis was undertaken in this case study of local sports coverage by ESPN and newspaper websites.

Content analysis was introduced by Alfred R Lindesmith in the 1930s as a method to refute hypotheses and was further developed in the 1960s by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Since the 1980s, this approach has been used with increasing frequency to measure the success of public relations campaigns and identify trends (Maynard & Tian, 2004).

A key strength of content analysis is that it allows the researcher to process large amounts of text and analyze it by looking for specific words, phrases, or other criteria. This is especially useful when examining the content of websites, which are updated several times a day.

As opposed to qualitative content analysis, which uses subjective analysis, this study focused on quantitative analysis. The primary reason for this was the local aspect of the study. One researcher cannot know the cultural nuances of both the Midwest and the Northeast. This eliminates the potential effectiveness of a qualitative content analysis.
Four local sports sites were subjected to analysis: ESPNChicago.com, ESPNBoston.com, Chicagosports.com, and Boston.com/sports. Chicagosports.com and Boston.com/sports were chosen because they are the most popular newspaper-based sports sites in the Chicago and Boston markets (Chicagotribune.com, Boston.com). These two sites are in direct competition with the ESPN sites.

Units of Analysis

Each site was checked once daily for a period of 2 weeks beginning on Monday, Jan. 4, 2010, and ending on Sunday, Jan. 17, 2010. They were checked each day at approximately 1:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. A period of 2 weeks was selected because that is enough time to establish the patterns of each site. A 1-week period would run the risk of being conducted during an unusual news cycle, while a period of a month or longer would be wasteful as the cycle of stories and columns is likely to run on a weekly basis. In addition, the online sports world is always changing, with new sites being launched constantly. Too much data to analyze or too much time spent analyzing data runs the risk of lowering the study’s usefulness in the real world.

The sites were perused as thoroughly as possible to ensure that every story posted by each site was included in the final analysis. The complete text of each story was
read by the researcher. Videos were watched in their entirety. While some stories and videos were placed more prominently on the site than others, each one was included because there is no way to determine exactly what content draws viewers to the sites.

Only original content was included in the number of stories in the sample. Content archived from the Associated Press, main ESPN site, other newspapers under the same ownership, or other sources could be obtained elsewhere by searching the internet. Therefore, archived stories or columns did not count towards the total for each site.

Data were analyzed based on quantitative criteria. The first coding category was a measure of the sheer amount of content. This means measuring the total number of new stories and columns run by each site daily (any opinion piece, regardless of whether it is labeled as a “blog” or a “column,” was listed as a column for the purposes of this study).

A second coding category was the number of sources used per story. If one Web site runs mostly one source stories and another consistently runs stories with three or more sources it would speak greatly for the strength of the latter site. This is due to the fact that more interviews and more research is needed to generate multiple sources for a story.
The third coding category was the percentage of stories dedicated to each level of competition. The newspaper sites may focus more on local colleges and high schools, while ESPN may focus more on smaller professional sports such as the WNBA and MLS.

Teams and sports leagues were grouped into categories as opposed to being measured individually. Coverage of the NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL was combined into a category labeled “Major Professional sports.” All coverage of local college sports teams was combined and labeled “Local College Coverage.” Stories about any local high school sports were labeled as “High School Coverage.” Lastly, all professional sports excluding the four leagues already mentioned were combined and labeled as “Additional Professional Sports.”

A fourth coding category was the amount of video uploaded daily. Some fans may prefer to watch coverage rather than to read it. ESPN has already established that it will run a daily 5-minute local SportsCenter on its sites (Lowry, 2009) while the Tribune and Globe may or may not run video of their own.

A separate coding category was created for content relating to the NHL, AFL, and MLS. Content relating to these sports leagues was coded according to the competition level (NHL as a major professional sport, AFL and MLS as a minor professional sport) and separately as an NHL, AFL, or MLS story. This was due to accusations claiming ESPN has
neglected the NHL and given special attention to the AFL and MLS for financial reasons.

**Procedures**

Individual pieces of coverage were placed into three categories: stories, columns, and videos. Stories consisted of written pieces that did not include the opinion of the writer as part of their content. Columns, on the other hand, consist of written pieces that do include opinions of the writer. All videos were combined into one category – “videos” – regardless of their content.

Stories were separated from columns to help determine what type of content each site provides. Some viewers may visit sites simply to check sports scores and get relevant information. Others may visit to read columns by their favorite writers. Blogs and columns were combined as online readers are unlikely to distinguish between the two. All videos were combined because videos will likely constitute only a small percentage of overall content. In addition, segments displaying news and segments showcasing opinions are often found in the same video. This makes potential further categorization difficult.

The newspaper sites were combined, as were the two ESPN sites, in the final analysis. Once the total number of stories, columns, videos and minutes of video, sources per column and sources per story were established, the
newspaper sites were compared to the ESPN sites using cross tab tests to determine if there were significant differences between them.

Concentration of coverage was determined by recording what sport and what team each piece of content was about. This information was also tested to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the ESPN sites and newspaper sites.

Cohen’s Kappa was used to test for intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability for all items coded was good to perfect; Website type $\alpha=1.0$; Type of content $\alpha=.83$; Number of sources $\alpha=.98$; Video length $\alpha=.98$, Competition level $\alpha=.84$; NHL, AFL, MLS content $\alpha=1.0$.

A numerical analysis of each research question will be presented in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Comparing data from the 2-week period of study revealed content differences between the ESPN and the newspaper sites. This suggests that ESPN does have a different agenda compared to the Chicago Tribune and the Boston Globe.

**RQ1: What Is the Content of the ESPN Websites in Boston and Chicago?**

ESPNChicago.com and ESPNBoston.com combined for 308 stories, columns, and videos during the 2-week evaluation period. ESPNBoston.com generated slightly more content overall, with 163 individual pieces of content recorded throughout the evaluation. ESPNChicago.com produced 145 stories, columns, and videos during the evaluation.

**Stories**

ESPNBoston.com produced 78 stories during the evaluation period, while ESPNChicago.com ran 72. The Chicago ESPN site had slightly more sources per story than ESPNBoston.com, 1.24 to 1.18. Combined, the two sites posted 150 stories at an average of 1.21 sources per story.

**Columns**

ESPNChicago.com featured more columns and more sources per column overall than ESPNBoston.com. It produced 37 columns with 1.76 sources per column, while the Boston site ran 25 columns with an average of 1.25 sources per column.
They combined for 62 columns total with an average of 1.55 sources per column.

**Videos**

ESPNBoston.com posted 60 videos at an average of 2.17 minutes per video. ESPNChicago.com posted 36 videos averaging 2.47 minutes per video. They combined for 96 total videos and 2.28 minutes per video.

**Summary**

ESPNChicago.com averaged 5.12 stories per day and 1.24 sources per story. ESPNBoston.com averaged 5.57 stories per day and 1.18 sources per story. ESPNChicago.com averaged 2.64 columns per day with 1.76 sources per column. ESPNBoston.com averaged 1.79 columns per day with 1.55 sources per column. ESPNChicago.com

**Concentration of Coverage**

Analysis of the concentration of coverage provided insight into the ESPN sites’ agendas. The two sites combined produced a total of three high school sports stories. They ran 10 stories which centered around local college sports.

ESPNChicago.com featured 10 stories on additional professional sports, while ESPNBoston.com produced one. In contrast, ESPNBoston.com ran 138 stories on major
professional sports and ESPNChicago.com ran 104. Thus, the sites were heavily skewed toward major professional sports.

**RQ2: What Is the Content of the Boston Globe’s Sports Website?**

Boston.com/sports produced a total of 222 stories, columns, and videos throughout the evaluation period. The site posted 140 stories, averaging 2.28 sources per story. It posted 57 columns during the same period, averaging 1.11 sources per column. This means that the Boston Globe sports site had the greatest number of sources per story, but the lowest number of sources per column among the four sites. The site posted 25 videos at an average of 2.2 minutes per video.

Boston.com/sports boasted more balance in coverage when compared to the ESPN sites. Thirty high school and 21 local college stories appeared on the site during the evaluation period. In addition, the site posted 13 stories on additional professional sports. However, the greatest number of stories was still devoted to major professional sports. The site produced 140 stories about teams from the NFL, MLB, NBA, and NHL.

**RQ3: What Is the Content of the Chicago Tribune’s Sports Website?**

Chicagosports.com posted a total of 269 videos, stories, and columns combined during the evaluation period, the greatest number out of the four sites. It posted 192
stories, averaging 1.92 sources per story. In addition, it 
56 columns were produced at an average of 1.36 sources per 
column. The site posted 21 videos and averaged 2.5 minutes 
per video. This was the lowest number of videos among the 
evaluated sites, but the highest average number of minutes 
per video.

The Chicago Tribune sports site featured the most high 
school sports coverage. It generated 59 stories about high 
school sports. This was nearly twice as many as the nearest 
site, Boston.com/Sports, and more than 19 times as many as 
ESPNBoston.com and ESPNChicago.com combined. The site also 
produced 54 stories on local colleges and 16 stories on 
additional professional sports, giving it the highest 
totals in both categories.

The site posted 124 stories on major professional 
sports, the second-lowest among the four sites. However, 
this was still more than ESPNChicago.com. Chicagosports.com 
generated the most content overall.

**RQ4: In What Ways Is the Content of** 
**These Websites Similar?**

The greatest area of similarity between the two sets 
of sports sites was in coverage of major professional 
sports. Aside from videos, this was the only area of 
coverage where the ESPN sites posted similar to their 
newspaper counterparts. However, even in this case, the 
Boston newspaper site produced more stories than
ESPNBoston.com, and the Chicago Tribune’s site posted more stories than ESPNChicago.com.

Other areas of similarity included the average number of sources per column and the average number of minutes per video. The newspapers averaged 1.23 sources per column while the ESPN sites averaged 1.55, giving ESPN a slight advantage. The newspapers averaged 2.34 minutes per video, slightly more than the ESPN sites’ average of 2.28 minutes per video.

RQ5: In What Ways Is the Content of These Websites Dissimilar?

The two sets of sites were dissimilar in many ways, from what sports they covered to the way they chose to cover them. While the ESPN and newspaper sites did run a similar amount of major professional sports stories, this similarity is diminished when measured as a percentage of overall content.

A crosstab test was calculated to determine if there was a difference in type of media between the four websites (see Table 1). A significant difference was found $\chi^2=(6, N=799)=75.95, p.<.001$.

Number of Stories, Sources per Story

The newspapers held a significant advantage over ESPN in the overall number of stories posted during the 2-week period. The ESPN sites combined for 150 stories, while the
newspapers combined for 332 stories. There was a less pronounced difference in the average number of sources per story. The newspapers combined for 2.09 sources per story, while the ESPN sites combined for 1.20 sources per story. Thus, the newspapers featured 75% more sources per story (see Table 2). A crosstab test was calculated to determine if there was a difference in number of sources between the four websites. A significant difference was found $\chi^2 = (30, N=799) = 127.74, p.<.001$.

### Table 2. Sources per Story/Column (Combined)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESPNChicago.com</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPNBoston.com</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>.5%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicagosports.com</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston.com/sports</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>82.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Note: 17.8\% of overall content was video and was not included)
Number of Columns, Sources per Column

The newspaper sites held an advantage in the number of columns produced with a combined total of 113 columns to ESPN’s 62. ESPN averaged 1.52 sources per column while the newspapers averaged 1.22 sources per column, giving ESPN a slight advantage.

Overall Number of Videos, Minutes per Video

ESPN held a sizable advantage in the number of videos produced per day. ESPNChicago.com and ESPNBoston.com combined for a total of 96 videos posted during the 14-day evaluation. In contrast, the Chicago Tribune and Boston Globe posted 46. ESPN averaged 2.23 minutes per video, while the newspapers averaged 2.37 minutes per video (see Table 3).

Table 3. Minutes per Video

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>.5-1</th>
<th>1.5-2</th>
<th>2.5-3</th>
<th>3.5-4</th>
<th>5+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESPNChicago.com</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>.5%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>.4%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPNBoston.com</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>.4%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicagosports.com</td>
<td>.3%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>.5%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>.3%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston.com/sports</td>
<td>.9%</td>
<td>.7%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Note: 82.2% of overall content was written and was not included)
Overall Combined Content

Combining columns, stories, and videos, the newspaper sites posted a total of 491 individual pieces of content during the 2-week period. In contrast, the two ESPN sites posted a total of 308 pieces of content. These data point to a greater amount of coverage overall for the newspapers. ESPN seemed to be more focused on videos, while the newspapers were more focused on written content.

High School Coverage

A crosstab test was calculated to determine if there was a difference in the amount of content devoted to each level of competition between the four websites (see Table 4). A significant difference was found $\chi^2=(12, N=799)=111.379, p.<.001$

Table 4. Competition Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Major Pro</th>
<th>Local College</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Add. Pro</th>
<th>Multiple Levels</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESPNChicago.com</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>.4%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPNBoston.com</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicagosports.com</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston.com/sports</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>63.1%</strong></td>
<td><strong>12.5%</strong></td>
<td><strong>11.5%</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>7.9%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(For the purpose of all data following this paragraph, videos, stories, and columns will all be listed together under the label of “stories” to save confusion.)

The largest difference was found in coverage of high school sports. ESPN’s two sites combined for three high school sports stories in the 2-week period, while the Boston Globe posted 30 and the Chicago Tribune posted 59, a total of 89. This is almost a 30-fold difference.

Local College Coverage

The second largest difference between ESPN and the newspapers was found in local college coverage. In Boston this includes stories and videos about Boston College, Boston University, the University of Massachusetts, and Northeastern University. In Chicago the following colleges all received at least one story about their athletic teams: The University of Illinois, DePaul University, the University of Notre Dame, the University of Illinois-Chicago, Loyola University of Chicago, and Northwestern University. ESPNBoston.com ran 10 stories each on colleges within its region; ESPNChicago.com ran 15 The Boston Globe ran 21 stories on local colleges, while the Chicago Tribune ran 54.
Major Professional Sports Coverage

There was not a great difference in the amount of coverage given to the major professional sports teams from each area. In fact, ESPNBoston.com generated more major professional sports stories than the Chicago Tribune did. The newspapers still produced more stories about these sports overall.

However, when considered as a factor of overall coverage, there is a pronounced difference between the two. Major professional sports content accounted for 78.57% of the content the ESPN sites produced, while it accounted for only 56.86% of the content on the newspaper sites. This difference becomes more distinct when considering that the newspaper sites ran 24 more pieces of content about major professional sports during the evaluation period.

While the ESPN sites are new and could expand in the future, these data indicate that, as of this writing, ESPN is concerned with covering only the most popular sports leagues on its local sites, leagues it has covered throughout most of its history (Dunnavant, 2004)

Additional Professional Sports Coverage

The category labeled “Additional Professional Sports” consisted of content about Major League Soccer, Women’s Professional Soccer, the Professional Golf Association, Figure Skating, Skiing, Major League Lacrosse, and the
American Hockey League. The results in this category were similar to the results in other categories, with the newspapers generating more stories than ESPN. ESPNBoston.com only posted one of these stories. ESPNChicago.com produced 10. The Chicago Tribune produced 16, while the Boston Globe posted 13.

Regarding the aforementioned AFL and MLS, ESPN did not grant special attention to these leagues (see Table 5). No AFL stories ran on any of the sites, which is possibly due to the league’s suspension of play following the 2008 economic collapse. ESPNChicago.com did post more stories about the MLS’ Chicago Fire than did the Chicago Tribune (seven compared to three). However, this finding is nullified by ESPNBoston.com producing zero stories about the local MLS team, the New England Revolution, during the evaluation period. The Boston Globe posted three stories about the Revolution during the period.

The four sites produced a similar number of NHL stories. ESPNChicago.com produced 21, ESPNBoston.com produced 20, Chicagosports.com produced 22, and Boston.com/sports produced 25.

A crosstab test was calculated to determine if there was a difference in the number of NHL, MLS, and AFL stories on the websites studied. A significant difference was not found $\chi^2=(9, N=799)=21.87, p>.005$. 
Thus, there were differences in content between ESPN and the local newspapers studied. ESPN tended to focus on videos, while the newspapers focused more on written coverage. ESPN focused mainly on major professional sports teams, while the newspapers spread coverage over all areas of sport. ESPN did not favor the MLS or AFL as it has been accused of by Chung (2007) nor did it neglect to cover the NHL, whose games it has not televised since 2005 (Stilson, 2007).

Some stories concerned multiple teams or national sports stories with little to no local angle. These stories were not recorded in the totals for these four categories. This explains the numerical discrepancy between the combined totals in this part of the analysis when compared to the breakdown based on type of coverage.

Aside from differences in coverage, the newspaper sites had more coverage overall during the evaluation period and more sources for the stories they produced -  

Table 5. NHL, MLS, AFL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>NHL</th>
<th>MLS</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESPNChicago.com</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPNBoston.com</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicagosports.com</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>33.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston.com/sports</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>87.4%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
data that reasonably suggests that they currently are a more complete source for local sports coverage.

Should ESPN succeed in securing the local sports coverage market, this data suggests that it will not be due to the quality of coverage provided by the newspapers. In addition, the columns written by ESPN’s contributors stayed very close to their stated subjects and did not display much of the writers’ personalities. Thus, ESPN will likely rely on brand recognition in this stage of its foray into local sports coverage.

Similarly, this data suggests that coverage of less established sports would likely suffer if ESPN successfully overtakes the local market. ESPN’s agenda seems to be in covering the largest and most popular sports leagues at the expense of local college and high school coverage. However, the current trend in the media community, and the business community as a whole, is toward consolidation (McKean & Stone, 1992). This approach may now be aligned with the public at large, which may not be as concerned about local college and high school sports as it was in past decades.

The next chapter will begin with a summary of what this study examined, the approach taken, and what the analysis revealed. It will end with a discussion of how the findings reflect on larger issues.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study analyzed the similarities and differences between ESPN’s first two local sports websites, ESPNChicago.com and ESPNBoston.com, and the sports websites of the largest newspapers in Chicago and Boston, the Chicago Tribune and the Boston Globe. Its purpose was to find what the content suggested about ESPN’s corporate agenda compared to that of the Chicago Tribune and Boston Globe.

The study used quantitative content analysis to measure how much content was being produced by each site daily. In addition, it measured how many sources per story and column were being cited on average by each site, and what sports were given the most coverage. Each site was checked daily for a period of 2 weeks in order to acquire this information.

An analysis of the content revealed that the newspaper websites provided more balanced coverage. They provided more content overall, more sources per story, and vastly more stories concerning local college and high school sports. The ESPN sites provided more videos and slightly more sources per column. ESPN focused mostly on major professional sports franchises in each city.

These findings suggest that ESPN’s corporate agenda is to concentrate coverage mainly on the largest and most
profitable sports leagues – an area of coverage where the media giant already holds considerable dominance. The findings suggest that the corporate agenda of the Chicago Tribune and Boston Globe is to focus on all sports of interest in each paper’s geographical footprint.

The differences between the newspapers and ESPN were even more pronounced when factors outside of the stated research questions were considered.

ESPN would often post a story one day and subsequently repost it the following day in a different part of the site under a different headline. This created the illusion that more coverage was being produced than was actually available.

ESPN also used questionable practices regarding the length of its stories. Many of the stories posted were extremely short, often no more than three or four sentences. This allowed ESPN to publish essentially one story in multiple places under multiple headlines. Whereas the Chicago Tribune would often combine several small stories under one headline such as “Bulls Bits” or “Bulls Notebook,” ESPNChicago would post each piece of information as a separate entity.

A third factor, related to the first two, is that these practices made the ESPN sites appear to have more sources than were truly available. Four short stories on the Boston Celtics posted on the same day by the same
contributor might all have Doc Rivers (the team’s head coach) as a source. By the stated research criteria, this is recorded as four stories and four sources, when in reality it is only one of each.

For example, on Jan. 15, 2010, ESPNBoston.com contributor Chris Forsberg wrote a column about a recent slew of Celtics injuries. It featured four sources. On the same day, Forsberg posted a story about the same subject, Celtics injuries. The story quoted two sources, Doc Rivers and Paul Pierce, both of whom were quoted in his column.

By contrast, the newspapers had sports staffs large enough to avoid posting more than one story per day by each contributor. In addition, designated columnists wrote only columns and starred in the sites’ videos. They did not write stories in addition to their commentary.

On the other hand, ESPN excelled at producing video content. The videos posted on its websites looked professional, with excellent graphics, multiple cameras, and smooth transitions. Its contributors appeared calm and focused on the screen. For the most part, the videos appeared just as impressive as the videos produced by the ESPN family of television networks.

The newspaper sites’ videos appeared amateur by comparison. They often featured only one camera, focused either on a reporter in a press box or on the event itself.
In addition, the reporters often appeared uncomfortable or ill-prepared for their segments.

For example, the *Boston Globe* produced a weekly sports talk show titled *Globe 10.0*, which featured columnists Bob Ryan and Chris Gasper. Ryan, who has worked for ESPN, appeared comfortable on screen and stayed focused on the camera at all times. However, Chris Gasper appeared uncomfortable, often focusing on Ryan instead of the camera or avoiding eye contact.

ESPN did engage in questionable practices in its selection of video content. Many of its videos consisted of short commentary from personalities who appear on the network’s national shows. Thus, the clips were likely no more than snippets of existing ESPN shows which happened to be about local teams at the time. For example, both ESPNChicago and ESPNBoston featured videos of hockey analyst Barry Melrose (who isn’t listed as a contributor for either site) discussing each cities’ local hockey team. These clips were likely taken from the ESPN2 show “Hockey 2Night” and thus not truly local.

ESPN’s story count was greatly limited by the provision which stated that Associated Press stories and stories from other sources would not be recorded in the analysis. All of the game stories which ran on the ESPN sites were from the Associated Press. Similarly, each game preview was written by a service known as Stats LLC. None
of these stories were recorded as they were not written by ESPN employees.

A gray area related to this was found in many of the stories written by the local ESPN contributors. Many of the stories ended with footnotes which read, “Material from the Associated Press was used in this story.” This likely refers to sources quoted in the story, meaning the ESPN staff reporter did not attend the event they were writing about or conduct interviews for their story. In addition, ESPN made a habit of citing and linking to newspaper stories on its sites. It was not uncommon for a story on ESPNChicago.com to begin with, “In a story that first appeared in the Chicago Tribune…”

All of these tactics by ESPN point to a corporate agenda emphasizing low production costs. The newspaper sites seemed to be less interested in cost-cutting, which allowed more complete coverage and more content about lesser-known high school and college teams. However, this may owe in part to print revenues the newspapers receive which may disappear in the coming years (Karp, 2007).

Another explanation for these differences is each sites’ historical background. Videos were more prominent on the ESPN sites, owing to ESPN’s history as a television entity. Similarly, the newspaper sites’ history as print publications may have contributed to their propensity for written content.
ESPN has also been a source of national sports news for nearly all of its existence, which may help explain why its content is heavily skewed towards major professional sports teams and leagues. In contrast, the newspapers have long historical ties to the regions they come from, thus they have superior coverage of high school and college sports that have little national appeal.

Yet another explanation is that the ESPN websites have only been in existence for a few months. These sites may still be in an experimental or trial phase. If successful, they may increase local coverage and/or staff size in the coming months and years. It has already been speculated that, while ESPN does not provide much high school coverage at this time, it may do so in the near future (Lowry, 2009).

Aside from providing more videos, the only area in which ESPN outperformed the newspapers was in the number of sources per column. This may be explained by the smaller amount of coverage provided by the ESPN sites. The newspaper columnists, working for larger sports staffs and largely being independent of regular reporting duties, may be given more freedom in choosing what they decide to publish in their columns. This could mean they write columns that feature the writer’s personality more than the sport being written about and feature only zero or one sources as a result. Again, the ESPN sites have not existed
long enough to warrant this type of writing. There was no evidence suggesting that ESPN has any bias for or against the NHL, MLS, or AFL.

At this point, the ESPN sites do not appear to threaten the existence of the newspaper websites or their quality of coverage. In fact, an analysis of ESPNChicago.com and ESPNBoston.com compared to the Chicago Tribune and Boston Globe websites could lead an uninformed researcher to believe that ESPN was a shrinking entity with little money and a dim future, and by extension that the newspapers were a giant corporation with deep pockets and infinite resources. In reality the opposite is true. The ESPN sites’ tiny staffs, their tactics to make their coverage appear more complete, and their use of national sources for basic content can only lead one to conclude that ESPN’s corporate agenda is to treat these sites as a small side project at this time, and not one that is likely to produce a lot of revenue in the near future.

The largest question that arises from this research is which method will be the future of local sports coverage. Newspapers still receive the vast majority of their revenue from their print editions. A future where they exist only online, and only as a non-subscription service, is almost certainly a future of even greater staff cuts. ESPN’s corporate agenda in local sports coverage may seem incomplete and lazy, but it may simply not be realistic in
the future to provide the amount of local coverage newspapers currently dedicate to sports.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study is limited most directly by the time in which it was conducted. A similar study conducted one year, two years, or five years from today will provide a needed update to the local sports coverage market. ESPN may add more staff members and may include high school coverage if their sites attract more viewers. The newspapers may reduce their staffs, or they may become more intensely local as time moves forward.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

To make a future study more complete, a few new factors should be added to the analysis. These include the average number of words per story (which can be measured using a word processor) and the number of contributors writing for each site. This would hold the sites accountable for the division of one story into three or four and the practice of reposting one story in different places on different days.

A provision on the source of video content should be added as well. If a similar study is done in the future, it should not record video from national sources in the final analysis. For example, a two-minute clip from “Hockey
"2Nite" which happens to be about the Boston Bruins or Chicago Blackhawks is not a truly local sports video.

Lastly, a future study should include the pending ESPN websites in Los Angeles, Miami, Dallas, New York, and any other cities where an ESPN site is created. This will provide a greater sample size and geographic reach for the study, though it will likely require multiple researchers to record content.

This study analyzed sports coverage by ESPNBoston.com and ESPNChicago.com compared to that of the Chicago Tribune’s Chicagosports.com and the Boston Globe’s boston.com/sports using agenda setting as a theoretical framework. It found that ESPN’s corporate agenda differs from the Tribune and Globe sites and therefore may have an effect on sports coverage in those cities if its sites are adopted by a majority of sports fans in those cities.

The study found that ESPN’s corporate agenda was focused on major professional sports, while the newspapers focused on sports at every level in their regions. This difference in agenda should be further studied as ESPN continues its push into local sports coverage.
REFERENCES
REFERENCES


APPENDIX
Each website will be checked once daily. The researcher should begin research at the same time each day to provide consistency. All sections of each site will be examined in an attempt to capture all relevant content posted on a particular day.

**Websites**

The four websites will be coded as follows:
1=ESPNChicago.com
2=ESPNBoston.com
3=Chicagosports.com
4=Boston.com/sports

**Stories/Columns/Videos**

The three types of content appearing on the websites will be coded as follows:
1=Story
2=Column
3=Video

Stories will be defined as content that includes straightforward reporting or feature writing about events and does not include the opinion of the writer. Columns will be defined as content about any subject that includes the opinion of the writer. Written content will be coded as a story unless it contains one or more of the following criteria:
- Jokes written by the contributor.
- First-person pronouns referring to the contributor.
- Speculative or opinion-based statements made by the contributor and not attributed to another source.

**Stories from other services**

If a story’s byline credits a writer from the Associated Press or another national news service it will not be recorded in the code sheet as it was not produced by or for the websites being evaluated.

**Sources**

The number of sources for each story or column will be coded. Videos will not be coded for sources as they often consist of content from multiple broadcasts (especially highlight videos) and are difficult to attribute. Each person who is quoted or paraphrased in a story will be recorded as one source. If a quote or statement is attributed to another website, publication, or to the Associated Press or other national news sources, it will
not be recorded as that material was not produced by or for the websites being evaluated.
The number of sources appearing in stories and columns will be coded as follows:
1=1 source
2=2 sources
3=3 sources
etc...
99=Not Applicable (Video)

**Video Length**
The length of videos posted by each site will be coded. Video length, which will be rounded to the nearest half-minute, will be coded as follows:
1=30 seconds
2=1 minute
3= 1.5 minutes
4= 2 minutes
etc...
99=Not Applicable (Story/Column)

**Level of Competition**
The level of competition covered in each story, column and video will be examined. Only material that focuses on a single level of competition will be coded in this category. Material focusing on multiple levels of competition will not be coded in this section of analysis as it would be confusing and overly convoluted. Material focusing on multiple levels will still be included in this study overall as it is part of the content produced by the websites being evaluated. The levels of competition will be coded as follows:

1=Major Professional Sports
2=Local College Sports
3=High School Sports
4=Additional Professional Sports
99= Multiple Levels/Not Applicable

Major professional sports include:
- Major League Baseball (MLB)
- National Basketball Association (NBA)
- National Football League (NFL)
- National Hockey League (NHL)

Local college sports include any sport involving National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) teams from the Chicago or Boston regions:
In Boston:
- Boston College
- Boston University
- The University of Massachusetts
- Northeastern University

In Chicago:
- The University of Illinois
- The University of Illinois-Chicago
- Loyola University of Chicago
- Northeastern University
- The University of Notre Dame
- DePaul University
- Marquette University

Examples of high school sports include any sport involving teams from the Chicago or Boston regions that are incorporated under the Illinois High School Sports Association (IHSSA) and the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association (MIAA).

Examples of additional professional sports include:
- Major League Soccer (MLS)
- Arena Football League (AFL)
- Women’s Professional Soccer (WPS)
- Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA)
- American Hockey League (AHL)
- Professional Golf Association (PGA)
- North American Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR)
- Any organized sports competition utilizing paid athletes, not including the MLB, NBA, NFL, or NHL

**NHL/MLS/AFL**

Individual sports leagues will be coded only if a story concerns the National Hockey League (NHL), Major League Soccer (MLS), or Arena Football League (AFL). ESPN has been accused of neglecting the NHL and promoting the AFL and MLS (Similar accusations have not been made about any other sports league). Including these leagues in this analysis may reveal to what extent, if at all, ESPN is engaging in the conduct of which it is accused.

1=NHL
2=MLS
3=AFL
99=Other
Examples of NHL, MLS, and AFL teams include:

- Chicago Blackhawks (NHL)
- Boston Bruins (NHL)
- Chicago Fire (MLS)
- New England Revolution (MLS)
- Chicago Rush (AFL)
- There is no AFL team in Boston
California State University, Fresno

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