Uses and Gratifications of Twitter as a Specialized Sports News Source

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The emergence of the Web 2.0 application Twitter in the past few years has created a considerable amount of discussion, and even confusion, in how it can or should be applied to the sports world (Whiteside, 2009a, Whiteside, 2009b). Twitter, a micro-blogging application, allows a content creator to send text-only messages of 140 characters or less (Palser, 2009), and to do so from both static and portable Internet-enabled communication devices. As such, individuals can send Twitter messages from their portable phones. While most think of Twitter and its accompanying ‘tweets’ as a method of personal communication, the medium has already demonstrated its suitability as a source of live, on-the-spot news. For instance, during the initial moments of the terror attack in Mumbai, India in 2008, it was on Twitter that one would find live updates and first-hand accounts of the situation (Arrington, 2008; Wolfe, 2008), as opposed to mainstream media sources. Similarly, during the civic violence in the aftermath of the Iranian elections in 2009, a government-imposed blackout of mainstream media coverage could not stem the flow of information from protesters being sent through Twitter and other Web 2.0 applications (Grossman, 2009).

Coaches, athletes, and athletic departments are already utilizing Twitter as a source of news, public relations, and marketing information (Bell, 2009; Clavio, Eagleman, & Cooper, 2009; Hutchens, 2009; Kimball, 2009; Mahmud, 2009; Show, 2009). Much of the media attention on the sports-Twitter nexus has focused on major athletes such as Shaquille O’Neal, or coaches from major athletic programs, such as Tennessee football’s Lane Kiffin (Whiteside, 2009b) or Indiana basketball’s Tom Crean (Hutchens, 2009). However, little attention has so far been paid to the effect of Twitter feeds on non-revenue sports teams and coaches. Also, there has been little to no research into the actual recipients of these messages, and their reasons for participating in these teams’ Twitter feeds.

The purpose of this study is to examine the audience of Twitter feeds through a uses and gratifications approach (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Through this approach, it is the goal of this study to ask consumers of a Twitter feed what they are getting out of the usage of that feed, what needs the feed satisfies, and to ascertain if there are dimensions of gratification for users of this new medium.

The methodology for this study will involve the creation of a Twitter feed by the investigators, and the advertisement of this feed on message boards and through college sports information departments focused on the NCAA sport of wrestling. This sport maintains a dedicated fan base, yet does not receive a large amount of coverage, either through collegiate web sites or in the mainstream media. Therefore, in many cases, there is no live reporting of wrestling meets, forcing out-of-town fans to have to wait for results to be posted after the fact. A Twitter account of these events is attractive to both practitioners and fans, due to the low barriers of entry for both parties.

Utilizing the aforementioned created Twitter feed, investigators will generate live coverage of selected meets throughout the 2009-10 wrestling season. Following each of these meets, a link will be posted in the feed, asking feed users to participate in a survey. This survey will collect data related to demographics, new media usage, and uses and gratifications information. At the conclusion of the wrestling season, survey data will be aggregated and statistically analyzed. A factor analysis will be conducted on the uses and gratifications data to determine whether there are any clear dimensions of gratification.