As NCAA Division I athletics departments have grown to the size and scope of midsized corporations, so has the importance of public relations to those departments and their institutions (e.g., Ruihley & Fall, 2009). Athletics administrators are under pressure to respond to the demands of the 24-hour news cycle for their departments' websites and external news outlets (e.g., Hardin & McClung, 2002; Stoldt, et al., 2001). Activities of administrators, coaches and athletes are monitored and analyzed by news media, fans on Internet message boards, university administrations, the NCAA, and federal and state governments (e.g., Barnett, 2008; McConnell, 2007; Plourd, 2009; Ruihley & Fall, 2009).

While this scrutiny can be disastrous when negative information is revealed, it can also be an opportunity for departments to promote their programs and tout their accomplishments. The dissemination of positive information across an array of stakeholders can benefit athletics departments by attracting sponsors/donors, fans and recruits, as well as creating community goodwill (e.g., Drape & Thomas, 2010; Ruihley & Fall, 2009). Athletics directors (ADs) are in powerful positions as CEOs of an industry that commands the attention of journalists, fans, community members, scholars, sponsoring corporations and the U.S. government (e.g., Clark, Apostolopoulou, Branvold, & Synowka, 2009; DeSchriver, 2009; Hechinger, 2009; Kahn, 2007; McConnell, 2007; McCormick & McCormick, 2008; Plourd, 2009). However, there is scant research related to intercollegiate ADs and public relations.

The purpose of this study is to examine ADs' understandings of public relations, particularly as they relate to media issues and challenges. For this study, a qualitative, grounded theory approach and in-depth interviewing method was used (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Gurwitsch, 1974; McCracken, 1988). Twelve NCAA Division I ADs were interviewed, and their transcripts were analyzed using comparative analysis procedures (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The lived realities and experiences expressed by the participants in their own words are the data used for "grounding" the theory that emerges from the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 4). Excerpts from participant interviews are included in the findings for illustration and justification.

Participants described approaches to dealing with new and traditional media. These approaches to media can be characterized as relational or functional. Preparation, in the form of media training, was an important aspect of media relations to some participants.

Although participants acknowledged the benefits of new media to the promotion of their programs, they emphasized it as a public relations challenge as well. New media for these participants include online newspapers, websites, blogs, message boards, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Many participants said that familiarity with new media and what it can do is a must for the modern AD. There was concern among several participants about journalists who publish stories before they have all the facts. This phenomenon was named "ready, shoot, aim" journalism by one participant. Some felt that the financial struggles of newspapers and local TV networks have impacted the entire media industry. These impacts are becoming long-term effects for ADs and their employees. However, participants have found ways to respond to new demands from media in the "age of the Internet."

The findings of this study offer considerations for NCAA Division I ADs, as well as members of the sport media industry. Suggestions for future research—as well as limitations of the current study—are also discussed.