Abstract

Non-media affiliated sports blogs represent the largest contingent of sports blogs today, yet this study of 126 professional baseball teams indicates that access for sports bloggers remains more restricted than for traditional media in professional baseball. While teams place fairly high levels of trust in traditional media, they do not extend the same sentiment to bloggers. Teams also turn away far more credential requests—requests for access—from bloggers than from traditional media outlets. Bloggers who are not connected to mainstream media outlets may be the most susceptible to credentialing rejection. Teams acknowledge that bloggers are at least somewhat important to the future media coverage of their teams, but that potential has not yet resulted in equal media access.
Digital platforms such as blogs and Twitter represent powerful sources in the media environment of sports, where the audience has now become part of the news and information sharing process alongside traditional news outlets (Hutchins, 2010; Zirin, 2008). More than two billion people now use the internet daily, many actively creating and maintaining spaces such as blogs that allow them to select and interact with the news and information most important to them (Ebner & Schiefner, 2008; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Pingdom, 2010). Yet, relatively little literature has explored the expanding role of digital platforms in the media coverage of sports (Hutchins, 2010).

According to Technorati—a website that compiles a running index of more than one million English-written blogs—there were more than 8,670 sports blogs as of October 2010. Of those, football (1,508), baseball (961), motor sports (761), golf (694), and basketball (573) ranked as the most popular. In perspective, Technorati (2010) reported there were approximately 8,700 health blogs, 6,300 blogs about US politics, 6,050 religion blogs, and 5,000 music blogs—all indicating, by comparison, the significant size of the current sports blogosphere. Further, teams and traditional media outlets alike have expressed concern over the dissemination of breaking news and “inside information” about sports teams and players, which often circulates first through digital platforms (Hill, 2009; Hutchins, 2010).

While bloggers may produce content for traditional media outlets, others may blog for their own enjoyment or to share with family and friends (Singer, 2007). This study differentiates between bloggers associated with media outlets, calling them
“mainstream bloggers.” Many staple media outlets have employed sports-specific mainstream bloggers (i.e., Yahoo! Sports, ESPN, L.A. Times, etc.). However, just one of the top 10 sports blogs according to Technorati (2010) is directly associated with a mainstream publication (i.e., The L.A. Times sports blog). The majority is operated by individuals without connections to media outlets. This study refers to them as “independent bloggers.” Noting their prevalence in media coverage of sports, independent bloggers represent relatively new news and information sources that deserve scholarly attention.

A growing number of independent bloggers associate their work with professional journalism (Iacono & Skerik, 2010). Despite this, at least one study indicates that independent bloggers are the least trusted form of media available (eMarketer, 2009). More recent research indicates that trust in bloggers may be increasing. Johnson and Kaye (2009) observed that political blogs may be more credible sources of political news and information than online issue-oriented sites, candidate sites, electronic lists, and chat rooms. Sports blogs may be somewhat parallel to political blogs, offering niche coverage for audience consumption. Yet media access for bloggers, especially independent bloggers, has become a source of contention among sports teams (Corazza, 2010; Fromentin 2010; Wyshynski, 2010a).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite their reach and importance to society (Zirin, 2008), independent bloggers may not be afforded the same media comforts as traditional journalists, especially when it

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1 Illustrated by Technorati’s daily sports blog tracker at http://technorati.com/sports
comes to access. A document recently released by the National Hockey League indicated teams want to restrict access for bloggers, barring them from certain areas that are traditionally open to sports media such as visiting locker rooms (Wyshynski, 2010a). In November 2010, the New York Islanders pulled the credential of a popular blogger, arguing that Christopher Botta was making news rather than reporting it (Wyshynski, 2010b). Similarly, Major League Baseball has continued to enforce strict guidelines against credentialing independent news outlets and reporters (Ferris, 2006). Yet, the independent blog MLBTradeRumors.com remains the most-visited baseball-specific blog globally (Technorati, 2010). Further, at least one Major League Baseball team has experimented opened the doors for bloggers. The Cleveland Indians recently invited bloggers and other individuals engaging in social media (i.e., Twitter) to cover their home games from a special section in the stands (Corazza, 2010).

This study seeks to understand how access is afforded to traditional news outlets (New York Times, Sports Illustrated, etc.), mainstream bloggers, and independent bloggers. Research indicates that access for independent bloggers may be limited because they are perceived as lacking objectivity and trustworthiness often associated with traditional media outlets (Kent, 2008). However, literature has not connected trust with media access in professional sports where independent media sources are becoming more crucial to media coverage (Hutchins, 2010). Because teams select who to grant media access to and who to turn away, this study examines how much trust teams place in traditional media outlets compared to mainstream and independent bloggers, what relationship exists, if any, between the trust teams extend to traditional media outlets and
bloggers, and their willingness to provide bloggers, both mainstream and independent, with levels of access similar or equal to traditional journalists.

**Emerging digital media**

In their quests for information, today’s internet users expect news media to be largely interactive, a characteristic which most traditional news outlets are continuing to catch up to ("New Media, Old Media: The blogosphere," 2010). Such interactions are robustly offered by emerging digital media modalities such as blogs. Given the declining economic and production value of traditional journalism ("New Media, Old Media: The blogosphere," 2010), blogs continue to have dollar appeal, especially for their producers, who may expect to incur little cost (other than time) when creating and maintaining a blog (Singer, 2007). Such appeal has led to a relative explosion in the number of active blogs today (Johnson, et al., 2008).

The audience of old now plays an active role in news and information sharing. As such, new definitions of journalism have emerged to incorporate the active role of individuals who may not have journalistic backgrounds or may not see themselves as journalists. Hermida (2010a,b) recently argued that given new digital modalities such as Facebook and Twitter, the audience has become a critical component of the news and information sharing process. Journalism has become, according to Hermida (2010b), omnipresent and multi-directional. Other scholars have called for more extensive research into the role of para-journalists, citizen journalists, and individuals who may unknowingly contribute to news and information sharing (Burns, 2010.).

While bloggers may or may not view themselves as journalists, they have become a key component of the news and information ecology, often filling gaps left by
traditional media outlets (Singer, 2007). Bloggers often contextualize news and information about a niche topic, offering extensive background, shedding light on new information, and voicing their opinions—all characteristics that have the potential to attract audiences (Singer, 2007). As such, the value of bloggers should not be overlooked and should be considered when formulating media access policies. Professional sports teams have been slow to engage in such action.

Sports teams and bloggers

Noting the changing landscape of sports media, several professional sports teams are in the process of rethinking how they view and interact with bloggers, particularly independent bloggers. As previously mentioned, the Cleveland Indians opened the Tribe Social Deck for the 2010 baseball season, giving independent bloggers an opportunity to report live from home games. While the 10-seat section allowed bloggers and other social media users to cover the team, it remained a cautious foray into the uncharted territory of social media engagement. The section was far removed from the traditional media press box, located down the left field line at Progressive Field in a former section of fan seating, and those receiving access (via invitation or request) were not permitted on the field pre-game or in the locker room post-game—both areas that have long been open to traditional media outlets.

As Corazza (2010) noted, the Cleveland Indians’ social media experiment caused some concern. Individual bloggers and Twitter users argued that access to sporting events should not be restricted to a reserved section of seats. Some felt the team was trying to control their monitor their content or place faces with names. Corazza agreed that removing the shield the Internet provides social media users might influence coverage
(i.e., Critics of the team may be less harsh once they actually come face-to-face with the team), but also noted that Cleveland’s receptiveness to the idea of independent bloggers and social media users as journalists. Even with some restrictions, the Indians’ move had the potential to change the way other professional baseball teams view bloggers.

Several teams in the National Hockey League (NHL) have also been deeply involved with independent bloggers on several notable levels. For example, the NHL has experimented with celebrity blogs, offering space on their league site to actors such as Kevin Smith, who himself questioned the restrictions of blogging to the public (Smith, 2009). The New York Islanders have allowed bloggers a chance to try out for press access through their Blog Box program (Eisenberg, 2010). The Blog Box experiment encourages fans and bloggers alike to contribute to the coverage of the Islanders – contributions that may land them coveted access to the team. Yet, Fromentin (2010) noted that a document leaked from the NHL front offices in 2010 revealed that teams remain cautious to allow access for mainstream and independent bloggers. The document also indicated that teams, not the league, police media access, indicating that teams themselves create guidelines for and control access of media access.

As illustrated by the Cleveland Indians’ example, sports teams exert control over most levels of media access. While an individual may attend a game or event (or simply follow the action TV) and file reports via telephone or other digital devices, such reports aren’t likely to include personally obtained interviews unless access to sources has been permitted by the team.

That said, audiences have continued to adopt novel participation methods in the media (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Perigoe (2009) noted that the public now explores
and shares news and information increasingly through digital platforms such as microblogs (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, etc.) and more traditional blogs. Such innovative approaches from audiences have blurred the lines between journalist and citizen observer, making the distinction between the two all the more critical for contingents where media access is coveted, such as sporting events.

**Media Gatekeepers**

Professional sports teams across all levels employ media relations experts to develop strategies to promote coverage of their teams. These experts use certain guidelines and standards for media access, also called “credentialing,” choosing who receives media access and to what degree that access is granted for games and events. The credentialing process is related in this study to the well-developed and communication-based theoretical concept of gate keeping—the process of how information is processed for public consumption. While the literature demonstrates a clear picture of gate keepers as individuals who filter the news and selectively choose what information is conveyed, how it is conveyed, and through what channels (Reese & Ballinger, 2001; Shoemaker, Vos, & Reese, 2008; White, 1964) this study focuses on credentialing, which determines whether or not individuals have access to teams. By examining the credentialing habits of professional sports teams, a stronger understanding of the gate keeping practices of the industry can be understood more clearly and implications can be discussed.

Lewin (1947) first introduced the concept of gate keeping, observing that in the role of families, wives and mothers traditionally made meals and decided what the family would eat. In other words, a person who decides what object (i.e., food) will move through each gate (i.e., dinner from the kitchen to the table; from the table to the family)
was considered a gate keeper. White (1950, 1964) first applied the notion to journalism, specifically focusing on how information flows through a news room. White (1950, p. 390) noted that gatekeepers play “a most important role as the terminal ‘gate’ in the complex process of communication.” Literature has since revised and contributed to the definition and application of gatekeepers. For example, McCombs and Shaw (1976) noted that the media decide what news to present to the public and how best to present it. Such a function of the media guides, according to McCombs and Shaw (1976), the agenda of the media, which in turn may influence the public.

Recent research has demonstrated that media gatekeepers select information for mass dissemination (Shoemaker, Vos, & Reese, 2008) with relatively little focus on audiences (Reese & Ballinger, 2001). However, such literature applies more strictly to the practice of traditional journalism (i.e., TV, newspapers, magazines, radio) with less emphasis on digital media. Notably, the audience does extend some amount of influence by selecting to consume information that pleases them while providing information. This is important to note in the case of this study, where bloggers represent alternative news and information sources. As such, more information is available for the audience to choose from, indicating again the importance of bloggers to the media process. Moreover, communication literature has largely focused on gate keeping as a function of the media rather than as a function of organizations that decide how much, if any, access the media should be afforded. This study advances the literature by considering accessibility as an important gate for traditional journalists as well as mainstream and independent bloggers.
Sturges (2001) argued that gatekeepers might be represented as any individual or object that controls access to any other individual or object—a broad definition that could be applied to any number of fields. Sturges (2001) used the example of a librarian, who may serve as a gatekeeper while directing individuals where to turn for certain books and resources. As a continuation, educators may control access to educational information, bankers may control access to account information, tax auditors may control access to certain historical financial information and so on. Greenwood (2006) argued that employers are gatekeepers not only to jobs, but to financial freedom, the relief of stress and to an extent, the overall enjoyment of life. Considering the importance of gatekeeping, specifically with regard to the relationship between professional sports teams, traditional journalists, and mainstream and independent bloggers, this study empirically explores how gate keepers at professional sports teams interact with individuals representing traditional journalism as well as relatively new forms of digital media. To this point, literature has not explored the gate keeping relationship between professional sports teams and traditional news outlets, let alone mainstream and independent bloggers. Such examination may foster a better understanding of the broader roles gate keeping plays in the news and information ecology, which certainly is not limited to sports.

**Trust as a choice**

Charged with the task of selecting who gets media access and who does not, gate keepers must decide whom to trust with access. In terms of professional sports teams and media coverage, gate keepers must decide who is admitted to the limited spaces available in press boxes, locker rooms, and other meeting areas. They must decide whom they can trust to speak with the athletes and representatives of their team. In doing so, they may
consider an individual’s employer or previous work for traditional reporters and mainstream bloggers. They may also consider an individual’s past connection with the team. However, none of these considerations can be easily made for independent bloggers, who tend to be perceived as lacking experience and credibility (Kent, 2008). Thus, choosing who to trust and on what basis can be a daunting task.

Trust has been defined as the willingness to take a risk on someone or something with a guaranteed outcome—as the area between knowing and not knowing (Simmel, 1964). Such a definition presents an abstract and often difficult concept to apply, let alone research (Wang and Emurian, 2005). Nonetheless, scholars have continued to use trust as an indicator of an individuals’ willingness to believe in others, follow the direction of others, and take risks without full awareness of outcomes. Such research has been presented and analyzed in fields of social science (Giddens, 1990; Hardin, 2002, etc.), economics (Buchan, Croson, & Solnick, 2008; Schechter, 2007; Sutter & Kocher, 2007, etc.), and management (Davis, Schoorman, Mayer, & Tan, 2000; Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007, etc.).

Only recently have scholars explored the implications of trust in media (Banning and Trammell, 2006; Johnson and Kaye, 2000, 2004, 2009; Tsafti, 2003; Tsafti & Capella, 2005). Johnson and Kaye (2000, 2004) argued that trust and credibility, often lumped together in research, play key roles in understanding why blogs have continued to gain both readers and authors, challenging traditional news and information outlets. Blog followers may indeed be predisposed to certain opinions and may find niche blogs that at the very least critically examine issues important to them (Johnson & Kaye, 2009). Kent (2008) noted that while bloggers may be perceived as less credible than traditional
journalists, they nonetheless draw tremendous audiences and that those perceptions may be changing. Individuals tend to less likely to engage in platforms they perceive to be untrustworthy or less than credible (Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Johnson et. al, 2008), an interesting point of consideration when noting that at least two studies have shown a larger portion of blog readers find blogs at least moderately credible (Johnson and Kaye 2007, Johnson & Kaye, 2009). Banning and Trammell (2006) also found that when reading blogs, individuals are aware that they may encounter inaccurate information and commentary, but still find blogs to be trustworthy sources of information.

Actually measuring trust remains a difficult task, and one rife with debate. Some research simply asks individuals to indicate how much trust they place in certain individuals or organizations (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn, 2000), while others search for multiple avenues of measurement (Buchan, Croson, and Solnick, 2008; Kale, 2007; Kohring and Matthes, 2007). Though recent studies have indicated that perceptions of ability and integrity may play a role in the development of trust (Mayer et al, 2007), clear definitions, methods of exploration, and operationalization remain elusive, particularly in media studies (Metzger et. al, 2003).

Regardless, trust remains a critical area of examination among a wide scope of fields. In particular, this study emphasizes the critical role trust may play when professional sports teams consider opening their organizations up to traditional media outlets, mainstream bloggers, and independent bloggers. Further, this study seeks to explore how that trust may ultimately affect credentialing, a key component when participating in the news and information ecology.

The following questions may help begin to uncover some of those answers:
RQ1: What characteristics make the media and bloggers (separately) trustworthy?

RQ2: What differences, if any, exist between verification of media credential requests versus blogger credential requests (i.e., request must be on letterhead, call to verify, signed form, view work online)?

RQ3: Is there any difference in the level of trust professional baseball teams place in traditional media versus mainstream and independent bloggers?

RQ4: Are teams' levels of trust in the media related to their levels of trust of bloggers?

RQ4a: Are teams’ levels of trust in mainstream bloggers related to their levels of trust in independent bloggers?

RQ5: Are professional teams more likely to credential traditional media or bloggers?

RQ6: Are teams’ levels of trust in media and bloggers related to the credentialing of media and bloggers?

Additionally, this study considers trust to be an evolving concept that requires continual updating and research. As such, considerations should be made as to how teams view bloggers in terms of future coverage:

RQ7: How important do teams consider mainstream and independent bloggers to the future coverage of their team?

METHOD

Seeking to examine trust and credentialing of traditional media and bloggers by professional sports teams, this study focused on professional baseball teams in North
America. Major League Baseball continues to offer strict policies against independent bloggers, but some teams have displayed a willingness to reconsider their approach. Baseball blogs also represent one of the more popular sports blog niches (Technorati, 2010) For those reasons, along with a limitation of resources, this study identified 252 professional teams in North America for a census survey.

Professional teams were either affiliated with Major League teams or operated with professional license. These teams included independently operating teams, teams associated with a Major League club (i.e., Rookie-Level, Single-A, Double-A, and Triple-A), and Major League teams. Every team’s media relations department received an advance mail notice of the survey in April 2010. The survey was conducted over a 21-day period beginning March 3, 2010 and consisted of two e-mail invitations that included a link to the online survey. A final phone-call was placed to non-responsive teams.

To answer questions regarding trust, teams were first asked broadly how much trust they placed in multiple forms of media (i.e., Local TV, National TV, Radio, Bloggers, etc.). Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale (1=None, 5=A lot). The survey then asked four questions to create a reliable index of trust: How much trust do you place in the media, in mainstream bloggers, and in independent bloggers? How credible are the media, mainstream bloggers, and independent bloggers? How important to your team’s fan base are the media, mainstream bloggers, and independent bloggers? How important to your team’s public image are the media, mainstream bloggers, and independent bloggers? Each question was asked independently for media, mainstream bloggers, and independent bloggers, and each used a 5-point scale (1=None; 5=A lot). Responses of the four questions were summed (Cronbach’s alpha traditional media = .76; mainstream
baseball's digital disconnect

bloggers = .82; independent bloggers = .79), and a t-test was used to see analyze differences between the three groups where plausible.

Teams were asked to choose which characteristics they thought made the media and bloggers (separately) trustworthy. Multiple responses were allowed from a list that included: quality of coverage, connection to media outlet, past work, look of the product, audience size, and name recognition.

To gauge credentialing processes, teams were asked to report how many media credential requests they typically received from the media and from bloggers during a season (i.e., 0-999) and what percentage of those requests they turned down (i.e., 0-100). Teams were also asked if they verified media credential requests, and if so, what verification processes they used. Multiple responses were allowed from a list that included: request must be on letterhead, call to verify, signed form, and view previous work online.

Teams were asked to report on a 5-point scale (1=None, 5=A lot) how important they considered mainstream and independent bloggers to be to the future coverage of their teams. Additionally, demographics were collected that included professional level of the team (i.e., Independent, Rookie-Level, Single-A, Double-A, Triple-A, Major League, and Other) as well as the size of their team’s market in terms of population (i.e., 1-10,000; more than 2 million, etc.). Given the comparison between nominal and ordinal data, point bi-serial correlations (pbr) were used to measure possible correlations.

RESULTS

Snapshot of Respondents
Of 252 identified North American professional baseball teams, responses to a 27-question online survey were received from 126 teams (50%). The response rate was well within an acceptable range for an online survey (Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004; Nulty, 2008; Sheehan, 2001). As Table 1 illustrates, more than a third of respondents (36.5%) were Single-A teams; approximately one out of five (18.3%) were Independent, 17.5% were Triple-A; 14.3% were Double-A; and 7.9% were Major League contingents, representing a third of all Major League teams operating in 2010. The remaining respondents were Rookie-Level (4%) and Other (1.6%).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Nearly half of the respondents (47%) reported serving market populations of 200,001 – 1 million people. The remaining said they were located in markets between 10,001 – 200,000 (28%) and more than 1.1 million (25%). The majority (89%) had three or fewer media relations employees in their front office. Notably, almost every team reported engaging in digital social media – all but three teams reported operating a Facebook page (98%), and more than nine out of 10 teams (92%) said they their organization used Twitter. Notably, both social media outlets are offshoots of blogs.

Reporting the characteristics that make the media and bloggers (separately) trustworthy (RQ1), teams indicated quality of coverage as the most important characteristic for both (98% media, 85% bloggers). As Table 2 indicates, 7 out of 10 teams (70%) indicated a connection to a recognized media outlet as an indicator of trust. Teams also agreed that an individual’s past work (i.e., articles previously written, video packages presented previously, etc.) made them trustworthy (67% for media; 56% for bloggers). While approximately 4 out of 10 (43%) said the professional look (i.e., clean
presentation, sharp design, etc.) of the media’s product attributed to trust, little more than 3 out of 10 (31%) said the same for bloggers. Audience size (33% for media; 32% for bloggers) and name recognition (36% for media, 28% for bloggers) ranked among the lower characteristics teams associated with trust.

In regards to the verification processes of media credential requests and blogger credential requests, teams reported they were only slightly more apt to verify credential requests from bloggers than from the media (94% vs. 91%). While there was no clear chosen method for verification of media requests, more than two-thirds of blogger requests (68%) were verified by viewing their work. Roughly a third less (36%) said they did the same for media requests, indicating teams tend to review the work of bloggers more than the work of traditional media when considering media credential requests. More than 4 out of 10 teams said that when they receive media requests they call to verify (48%), require requests on letterhead (42%), and require a signed form (i.e., Major League Baseball media terms and conditions). For blogger requests, more than 1 out of 3 (37%) teams reported making verification calls, and less than one-third required signed media forms (29%) or asked for requests on letterhead (23%).

Gauging Trust

As shown in Table 3, respondents reported the highest levels of trust in local TV (73%), local newspaper (70%), and sports magazines (61%). National media, as well as online media (i.e., news websites, blogs, etc.), received much lower levels of trustworthiness.
However, to measure the trust of media, mainstream bloggers, and independent bloggers, this study relied on the trust index discussed previously.

In regards to RQ3, “Is there any significant difference in the level of trust professional baseball teams place in all media versus mainstream and independent bloggers?” as Table 4 illustrates, a t-test using the trust index revealed teams place significantly higher levels of trust traditional media outlets than in mainstream bloggers (t=13.85, df=121, p<.001; M traditional media = 3.93, sd = .51; M mainstream bloggers = 2.85, sd=.83).

The index also revealed a statistically significant difference in the level of trust teams place in mainstream bloggers versus independent bloggers. A t-test using the trust index revealed teams place significantly higher levels of trust in mainstream bloggers than in independent bloggers (t=11.09, df=121, p<.001; M mainstream bloggers = 2.85, sd=.83; M independent bloggers = 2.09, sd = .71).

[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]

Again using the index scores, significant correlates were uncovered between teams’ levels of trust in traditional media and mainstream bloggers (RQ4) and teams’ levels of trust in mainstream bloggers and independent bloggers (RQ4a). A positive correlation existed between teams’ levels of trust in traditional media and mainstream bloggers (pbr = .237, p<.01). An even more statistically significant positive correlation existed between teams’ levels of trust in mainstream bloggers and independent bloggers (pbr=.519, p<.001). Notably, the professional level of teams did not correlate with any measures of trust for traditional media, mainstream bloggers, or independent bloggers.

Credentialing
In regards to RQ5, “Are professional teams more likely to credential media or bloggers?” teams were significantly more likely to turn away requests from bloggers. Nearly one-third of responding teams (31%) reported handing out between 0-30 media credentials during the regular season; another one-third (34%) said they gave out between 35-90 media credentials; and approximately another one-third (31%) issued 100-800 media credentials. The final 4% issued at least 900 credentials per season. Approximately 1 in 4 teams said they receive no media credential requests from bloggers, while more than two-thirds (67%) said they receive between 1-10 requests. Another 7% indicated receiving between 15-200 credentialing requests from bloggers. As Table 5 indicates, teams reported in terms of percentage they were more than three times more likely to turn away credential requests from bloggers than for traditional media (t= -6.45, df=116, p<.001; M traditional media = 8.42, sd=4.28; M bloggers = 29.94, sd=6.32).

Looking for a possible correlation between trust and credentialing of traditional media, mainstream bloggers and independent bloggers (RQ6), this study revealed only one statistically significant correlation. A negative correlation was found between the amount of trust teams place in independent bloggers and the percentage of rejected credential requests they reported for bloggers (pbr= -.234, p<.05).

**Future Importance**

Finally, in regards to RQ7, “How important do teams consider mainstream and independent bloggers to the future coverage of their team?” teams indicated that both mainstream and independent bloggers were at least somewhat important to the future coverage of their teams. Considering future importance, teams reported a mean of 3.20
for mainstream bloggers (sd=1.16), a number that dipped nearly 24% for independent bloggers (M= 2.59, sd=1.08).

**DISCUSSION**

This study began by noting the growing population of sports bloggers, indicating a sizeable contingent of individuals now using blogs to cover sporting events. Baseball blogs represent one of the most popular blog outlets in professional sports. As such, the practices adopted by professional baseball teams are worth examining and may be considered when researching other professional sports teams. However, because this study examined 126 professional baseball teams, generalizing the results beyond that scope is not advisable.

This study is the first of its kind to indicate empirically that professional baseball teams trust bloggers, even those attached to reputable media outlets, less than traditional media outlets. Despite their growth as substantial resources of information, teams trust independent bloggers even less. Subsequently, teams indicated a clear gap in media credentialing, saying they were more likely to reject blogger credential requests than those from traditional media. This study also revealed a correlation between teams’ credentialing habits and their levels of trust in independent bloggers, indicating that teams that place less trust in independent bloggers may be more likely to reject independent bloggers’ media credential requests. However, a correlation does not necessarily indicate a causal link. Hence, future research should seek to further understand this relationship. Still, the finding is interesting given that professional baseball teams indicated that bloggers, both mainstream and independent, are at least
somewhat important to the future coverage of their teams. Such potential, though, will remain crystallized until the media access gates swing more openly for mainstream and independent bloggers. At least one professional baseball team—the Cleveland Indians—have begun experimenting with more, albeit limited, access for independent bloggers. Despite concerns expressed by the National Hockey League, several teams have incorporated both mainstream and independent bloggers into their media coverage, indicating a need for future research to examine other sports.

Participants of this study indicated quality of coverage as the most telling characteristic involved with trusting an individual from both media and blogging arenas. Yet, quality is quite a subjective term open to the troubles of interpretation. What exactly reflects quality is subject to the interpretation of each team’s gate keeper. If that gate keeper chooses to grant or limit access based on quality of coverage, they must also be reflecting on the past work of individuals. As such, individuals who identify themselves as journalists typically come from journalism backgrounds and are associated with larger media outlets that hold them accountable. Journalists are viewed as individuals who observe events and report on them in typically unbiased fashion (Singer, 2007). Teams may take this into account when considering to trust individuals requesting access for coverage. Those with less journalism history and limited journalistic training may be viewed with caution. As Corazza (2010) noted, they may be seen more as fans of the game, causing some skepticism in their motives for access. Still, as some professional teams have illustrated, there are ways to incorporate mainstream and independent bloggers.

Questions of access
Receiving access to prove quality of coverage to media gatekeepers is not as easy for bloggers, both mainstream and independent, as it is for the media. This study indicated that mainstream bloggers are at least somewhat trusted by professional baseball teams on average and that for them, trust does not correlate with the media credentialing process. While mainstream bloggers may have a harder time convincing professional baseball teams to grant them media access, they are typically attached to media outlets and are typically easy to verify and to monitor. Mainstream bloggers do, after all, tend to report back to their mainstream media outlets—outlets that are tiered by multiple management levels and often have longstanding relationships with the professional sports teams they cover.

Independent bloggers—the least trusted of all current media forms according to professional baseball teams—don’t yet come by credentials so easily. When it comes to access, they may be the most likely to be turned away by professional baseball teams. Even though teams reported that quality of coverage is a key component of trust, independent bloggers may never receive a chance to prove themselves because they aren’t connected to a media outlet, don’t have a lengthy history of media coverage, etc. They may instead have to find other ways to gain trust, which is an important thought in the advancement of research in the gate keeping practices of sports teams. Future research may consider alternative or novel ways independent bloggers might gain trust. Research should also consider that independent bloggers may not necessarily rely on media access, and therefore trust from the teams they cover may not be as critical as trust from their readers.
Achieving greater levels of access may not be the top priority for all independent bloggers, who may enjoy the autonomy of covering events and offering content on their own time without restriction. Given the mobile nature of their content posts (i.e., using mobile phones, wireless laptops, etc.), independent bloggers can offer meaningful reports and insight without media access. They may choose to attend events and report from the bleachers, or simply watch events on TV or through streaming video. They may also reflect on the postings of other sources. All of this can be done with limited access to sports teams. As Bruns (2009) observed, bloggers have shown great resolve in covering politics and scandals, finding ways to add to and extend news and information conversations regardless of restrictions.

However, independent bloggers seeking access to professional baseball games may find their access to coverage opening up sooner rather than later. While large-market teams have begun experimenting with access for independent bloggers, this study showed that the same large-market teams are more trusting of mainstream bloggers. That may be good news for independent bloggers considering the positive correlation between trust of mainstream bloggers and trust of independent bloggers indicated by this study.

Independent bloggers may also benefit from growing scholarly and professional voices that continue to promote them, along with other social media users, as integral members of the news and information ecology (Hermida, 2010b; Lasica, 2003; Singer, 2007).

**Future research**

This study did not seek conclusive answers to how mainstream and independent bloggers can gain greater levels of media access in professional baseball. While the study
did reveal sharp contrasts in levels of trust and access extended to all bloggers and some of the subsequent characteristics teams reported that might make them trustworthy, results are limited to those findings. Further research should expeditiously approach the mediating relationship between mainstream and independent bloggers, gatekeepers for professional sports teams, and levels of access needed for extensive coverage. Further, deeper analysis of teams’ approaches to mainstream and independent bloggers and vice versa could yield notable findings. Trust may indeed play a role in the credentialing process, making it notable in terms of access, but it may not be the only factor in the credentialing process. A more conclusive understanding of how teams choose to limit access for coverage, and better yet, how to move beyond those limitations, should also be considered.

CONCLUSION

This study found that trust plays an important role in the credentialing process of media, mainstream bloggers, and independent bloggers. Credentials provide access to coverage otherwise unavailable to individuals, allowing for the dissemination of unique information. The current gatekeeping process of professional teams indicates a gap in the levels of access teams allot for the media, mainstream bloggers and independent bloggers. That gap is statistically correlated with trust for independent bloggers.

As this study indicated, trust is not a simple matter; it cannot be determined by a single factor. The media have existed in various forms for many years, and as this study illustrated, even they have not gained the full trust of professional baseball teams. But the traditional media have made strides just as professional baseball teams, and other
professional sports teams, have opened up to accept them. Such a symbiotic relationship—two outlets working toward unique goals—may ultimately help bloggers, especially independent bloggers, gain more trust from professional baseball teams.

Traditional media outlets may still be the most trusted among professional baseball teams, but research should continue to monitor the relationship between teams and individuals representing new platforms of digital media. While access provides individuals with opportunities to strengthen their coverage of teams, it does not alone dictate the voice of independent bloggers, who continue to find ways to present, contextualize, and comment on sports news and information. Future approaches to both trust and gate keeping may benefit from such an observation that indicates the ability of individuals to work beyond any restrictions that trust or access may present them.

As Singer (2007, p. 24) noted, journalists and bloggers “ultimately offer mutual benefits, and a twenty-first century public is better served by both together than by either alone.” Exploring ways to improve that relationship is a key component of research, and once which this study aimed to accomplish. Both the limited amount of trust professional baseball teams place in independent bloggers and the credentialing gap those bloggers must face illustrate there is still a ways to go before the public can fully benefit from their media coverage.
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### Table 1
**Responding teams’ professional levels**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Level of Team</th>
<th>Response Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>23 (18.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rookie</td>
<td>5 (4.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-A</td>
<td>46 (36.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double-A</td>
<td>18 (14.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triple-A</td>
<td>22 (17.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major League</td>
<td>10 (7.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2 (1.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 126 (100.0)

*N=126; Total respondents listed with percentages in parenthesis*

### Table 2
**Characteristics of trustworthy media and bloggers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trustworthy Trait</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Bloggers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of coverage</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to media outlet</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Work</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look of product</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name recognition</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience size</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N=126; Percentages listed*
Table 3
How trustworthy are the media and bloggers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outlet</th>
<th>% Very trustworthy</th>
<th>% A little or not trustworthy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local TV</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Newspaper</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Magazine</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Radio</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Newspaper</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National TV</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Website</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mainstream bloggers</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td><strong>18</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National TV</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Website</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent bloggers</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N=126, Percentages based on collapsed 5-point scale (1=Not all, 5=very much) for descriptive purposes*

Table 4
Trust index scores for media and bloggers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outlet</th>
<th>Mean Trust Index</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Media</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream bloggers</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N=121, Mean sum from four questions on 5-point scales (1=A lot, 5=None); t=13.85, df=121, p<.001*

Trust of Mainstream Bloggers and Independent Bloggers by Professional Baseball Teams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outlet</th>
<th>Mean Trust Index</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream bloggers</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent bloggers</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N=121, Mean sum from four questions on 5-point scales (1=A lot, 5=None); t=11.09, df=121, p<.001*
Table 5
Rejected credential requests

% of Media Credential Requests Professional Baseball Teams Turn Down on Average

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outlet</th>
<th>% Rejection</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>8.42</td>
<td>4.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloggers</td>
<td>29.94</td>
<td>6.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=116; Percentages listed; t=-6.45, df=116, p<.001