I. Project Summary

As social media platforms such as Twitter continue to gain credibility and functionality as digital reporting tools, inviting both trained and untrained journalists to the new creation process, sports organizations continue to struggle with appropriate means of accommodation. Where once media access was easily and unquestionably restricted to the elite few, more and more citizens are seeking similar access to offer breaking news, contextualization, and commentary on sports teams. Yet, these teams have moved slowly to meet the demands of the evolving media landscape.

This study seeks an ethnographic exploration of one sports team moving with, and possibly ahead, of the digital media curve. Major League Baseball’s Cleveland Indians, who last year opened up a section of seating exclusively for social media engagement, became the first professional team in any sports arena to offer full access to untrained social media journalists this season. The Indians have moved toward organizational transparency, allowing these journalists to report from a suite inside their home stadium while also affording them field and clubhouse access.

How did the Indians make such a choice that contrasts other organizational policies within MLB and other professional sports? What benefits and drawbacks did they predict? What has the experience been like? Will it guide policies of other teams, and possibly set the standard for MLB? Further, what do these news journalists look like? What are their backgrounds? How does their journalistic approach differ from traditional journalists? What have their experiences been like with the unprecedented access allotted by Cleveland?

These are all important questions this study seeks to answer. Not only can they illuminate the current practice of one team, but they can also offer theoretical and professional implications to multiple fields, including journalism, mass communication, sports business and management, and media relations.
II. Proposed Research

As noted, this study will be one of an ethnographic nature. Two graduate students in the school of journalism, both with ethnographic research experience as well as extensive sports backgrounds, will develop literature and appropriate research questions to produce at least two studies. One will focus primarily on the development and implementation of the Indians’ policy. The other will examine the journalistic norms and values of those reporters now immersed in the social media effort in Cleveland.

Previous literature has shown that the norms and values of journalists has been resistant to change in the past, with objectivity, accuracy, and speed of news discrimination representing core characteristics. However, more recent research by Dr. Dominic Lasorsa (UT-Austin), Dr. Seth Lewis (Minnesota), and Avery Holton (PhD student, UT-Austin) has indicated that social media such as Facebook and Twitter are causing shifts in journalistic values and practices. For example, more journalists are now offering opinion and discussing their daily lives, mixing news with “life-casting.” Further, journalists are also recycling and commenting on news and information provided by untrained journalists. Noting such, this study will rely on theoretical and practical research related to mass media norms and values. Theoretical considerations will also include gatekeeping theory and uses and gratifications. Avery Holton previously conducted research underwritten by the TPSM that looked at how the media relations departments of MLB organizations filtered media access (gatekeeping), and how digital outlets fulfilled different gratifications from traditional news platforms (i.e., keeping people connected, allowing two-way commentary, etc.). When combined, these three theoretical components – journalist norms and values, gatekeeping, and uses and gratifications – provide a strong backdrop for understanding current and future policies and practices with regards to digital media.

Such analysis will require multiple phone and in-person interviews with the policy creators and the practitioners. As such, both researchers will identify a range of open-ended questions to ask members of the MLB media policy committee, the Cleveland Indians, traditional journalists in Cleveland, and social media practitioners in Cleveland. Given the experimental nature of Cleveland’s new social media policy, the researchers will conduct interviews both during and immediately after the season, to
allow of instantaneous as well as reflective responses. At least one researcher will travel to Cleveland to examine firsthand the policy and practitioners in action. Avery Holton, the primary researcher, has an extensive background in public relations and communications having served in the Houston Astros organization as Director of Communications for the organizations’ Triple-A team for three seasons. That experience, along with a previously established relationship in Cleveland, will help the researchers gain access for interviews which others may not similarly be afforded.

Both researchers will transcribe their interviews, developing at least two research papers for conference presentation and publication by December 2012.

III. Additional Funding Opportunities

Because this study is grounded in exploratory research, and given that its findings may carry implications at multiple structural levels in MLB and other sports, it can be used to leverage additional funding in a variety of meaningful ways. First, the findings will most certainly indicate the need for more quantitative research into social media engagement so that teams may formulate more precise policies and procedures. Such a study could be developed with a partnership between TPSM and other teams, or perhaps MLB’s media research coordinators. Having researchers who have already completed the first steps of a pivotal area of concern no doubt lends itself to a partnership. Secondly, additional funding could be sought from leagues beyond MLB who are struggling with similar policy dilemmas. Offering them access to the initial findings and discussing the implications will certainly open new conversations and possibly lead to larger, annual funding opportunities. Especially noting the longitudinal nature of current policy changes, more sustainable funding should be pursued across as many leagues and organizations as possible. Other funding opportunities at local and community levels, as well as with independent social media outlets, should also be considered.