Covering sports, when there’s no sports

COVID, market orientation, paywalls and the Athletic

By Patrick Ferrucci

Abstract
This study incorporates in-depth interviews with 43 journalists from the digitally native, venture-capital-backed sports journalism organization the Athletic. Through the lens of gatekeeping and utilizing the concept of market orientation, findings illustrate how having a somewhat strong market orientation could positively impact gatekeeping processes. Data illustrated that, during the pandemic, journalists at the Athletic collaborated more and included more diversity in content. This positive result, which led to a subscription increase, is primarily due organization-level influences on gatekeeping. This study concludes with analysis on how these findings can affect journalism in general and sports journalism specifically now and after COVID-19.

Keywords
online news, gatekeeping, new media, digital journalism studies, market orientation

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COVID-19, like it did across all fields and industries, completely upended the landscape of sports in the United States. Sports journalism needed to adapt. While other reporting beats altered coverage to account for COVID-19, by, for example, changing routines, by and large the nature and frequency of stories remained the same, just with COVID-19 as a fundamental focus, both implicitly and explicitly, of all beats (Pratt & Smith, 2020). For sports coverage, though, the question became how does a reporter or organization or, more generally, an industry, cover something that no longer occurs or cover something with significantly diminished access? Not only did sports journalists have to alter normative routines of news production processes, but the pandemic forced them into conjuring up stories not necessarily about the sports they cover (Deitsch, 2020). In many cases, general news organizations redeployed sports journalists, having them cover or edit other genres of news (Pratt & Smith, 2020). Nonetheless, this approach could not work for journalistic organizations devoted to only covering sports. In fact, not only did these organizations still need to disseminate sports news; they needed to do it without the main asset sports journalists hold over actors on the boundaries of the profession such as bloggers: access. During the pandemic, sports journalists perform their duties while “having little to no face-to-face contact with the players and coaches” (Staff, 2020, para. 23).

At large sports journalism organizations such as ESPN, the pandemic “exacerbated” already-present issues such as dwindling viewership and catalyzed a “bunch of things” that these types of businesses “are going to be grappling with for quite a long time” (Deitsch, 2020, para. 6). But sports broadcast stations such as ESPN or Fox Sports could still produce opinion content, rush documentaries into production or rely on replaying classic sporting events. Yet, sports news organizations, particularly digital ones that publish solely news content, could not do the same. Founded in January 2016, the venture-capital funded the Athletic boasts more than 1 million subscribers, employs more than 300 full-time reporters and serves more than 45 geographical markets in the United States and Canada (Koo, 2019; Sherman, 2020). The news organization publishes all its content behind a paywall, meaning the only people who can read it are subscribers. While the Athletic’s sale to the New York Times Company for US$550 million occurred in early 2022, the sports news website navigated the majority of the pandemic as an independent organization (Hirsh et al., 2022). With American sports on hiatus for more than 4 months and, when they returned, scarce access for journalists, the company worried about rapidly losing subscribers, but, during the pandemic, subscriptions increased (Sherman, 2020), illustrating how the Athletic “has leveraged the resiliency of local sports writing and a willingness to pay for it to become one of the biggest sports publications in the country” (Gordon, 2018, para. 1).

This study attempts to understand how despite a scarcity of sporting events to cover or increasingly diminished access to sources, things that profoundly and negatively affected the majority of the sports journalism industry (Deitsch, 2020), the Athletic not only survived, but thrived in terms of increases in subscribers. As a venture-capital-funded news website that utilizes a paywall, the organization’s market orientation would suggest that it tailors content to the whims of subscribers (Beam, 1998; Ferrucci, 2020), but is that accurate for a site known to avoid the hot-take-laden content becoming more and more ubiquitous in sports journalism (Buzzelli et al., 2020)? By utilizing interviews with 43 full-time journalists at the Athletic, this study illustrates how the pandemic affected sports journalists who had to regularly produce content, but could not rely on the topics they normally covered in a prepandemic world.
Literature Review

**Market Orientation**

In the mid 1980s, during the first sustained economic downturn faced by the news industry in the United States, McManus (1994) observed a trend toward what he called market-driven news. He contended that due to lowering profit margins, perhaps for the first time in the history of the commercialized press in America, newsrooms began treating readers, listeners and viewers more as customers and less as citizens. This treatment became overt, with organizations relying on surveys, focus groups and other feedback mechanisms to gauge audience interests and then satiate those wants (Coulson & Lacy, 1996; McManus, 1995). Journalism, though, at least since the late 19th century, always precariously attempted to attain two distinct, but not necessarily nominative goals (Bagdikian, 2004). More specifically, Baker (1994) argued that, unlike most industries, journalism in the United States functioned as a dual-product model, as an industry that needed to sell itself to an audience to gain circulation or viewership, but then also needed to sell that audience’s attention to advertisers. Following that logic, Beam (1998) contended that news organizations could be placed on a market orientation continuum; he maintained that all news organizations are market oriented to some extent because an organization needs some semblance of an audience to survive. He suggested, therefore, that a news organization utilizing a strong market orientation

> identifies a potential market opportunity, selects a group of customers that it wants to serve and develops a strategy for efficiently meeting the wants and needs of those customers. The central business assumption is that long-run success depends on a strong, organization-wide focus on customer wants and needs. (Beam, 1998, p. 2)

Effectively, the closer a news organization hews toward traditional market logics, the more market oriented it should be classified (Beam, 1995); in other words, more specifically, the more a newspaper, for example, treats its readers as customers—and less as citizens—the more market oriented it should be considered (McManus, 1992).

For most of the 20th century, news organizations boasted such large profit margins and owners oftentimes left newsrooms to function as they saw fit, providing journalists with the autonomy needed to properly fulfill perceived normative goals (Bagdikian, 2004; McManus, 1994). This autonomy, even at the time, seemed necessary because only when news organizations earn robust profits regardless of content can the two main priorities of commercialized journalism—earning profit and upholding and strengthening democracy—seamlessly align (McChesney & Nichols, 2011).

While the vast, vast majority of news organizations in the 1980s and 1990s looked remarkably similar with advertising as the main revenue stream, the news ecosystem of the 21st century is diverse and hard to categorize. Almost two decades ago, when Beam (2003) first theorized about the effects of market orientation, he classified newsrooms as either strongly or weakly market oriented; while he argued for the need for a continuum, he operationalized market orientation in that binary fashion primarily due to the homogeneity of the news business at the time. However, due the proliferation of significantly more market models for news organizations, Ferrucci (2020), using
Beam’s overall ideas, fleshed out a market orientation continuum. By combining Beam’s definitions with the theory articulated by McManus (1994) concerning market orientation and news, Ferrucci (2020) operationalized a continuum featuring four discrete categorizations: strongly market oriented (publicly traded ownership), somewhat strongly market oriented (for-profit ownership, uses advertising and subscriptions), somewhat weakly market oriented (for-profit ownership, locally owned) and weakly market oriented (nonprofit). This categorization allows for a clearer understanding of how market orientation affects news organization (Zamith et al., 2020). Utilizing the categorization definitions set forth by Beam (1998) and the expanded one by Ferrucci (2020), the Athletic would be classified as somewhat strongly market oriented due to its primary funding (venture capital) and market model (paywall-protected). A somewhat strongly market-oriented news organization theoretically employs market-based logics such as prioritizing profits, but differs from a strongly market-oriented organization as it is not part of a publicly traded conglomerate.

**The Effects of Market Orientation**

In the late 20th century, when the vast majority of news organizations, regardless of publishing medium, relied on advertising for funding, scholars predominantly measured market orientation by surveying journalists about their perceptions of their organizations or by classifying organizations based on characteristics such as ownership type (family owned, chain, etc.), type of leadership or amount of soft news published (Beam, 2003; Lacy, 1991). During this period, journalists at more strongly market-oriented news organizations believed they had lower workloads (Lacy, 1991). Many studies have also found that market orientation can have significant effects on content. News organizations with a stronger market orientation published more soft news such as sports, features and lifestyle content, but this did not necessarily come at the expense of the amount of investigative journalism these organizations published (Beam, 2003). When covering a specific topic, a news organization with a stronger market orientation tends to publish more content than a news organization with a weaker market orientation (Ghiglione, 1984). And, more generally, the more strongly market oriented a newsroom, the more likely it is to publish content that neatly follows normative national cultural beliefs without ever challenging potential harmful hegemonic belief systems (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

Without the need to own a printing press or obtain a broadcasting license, the internet catalyzed a surge in new funding models of journalism that made it easier and far more economically viable to enter the field, and allowed for different approaches to disseminating content (Kaye & Quinn, 2010; Konieczna, 2018). With more types of funding models and disparate approaches to news production, the aforementioned market orientation continuum operationalized by Ferrucci (2020) “allows for a more robust examination of the effects” of market orientation (p. 256). Recent work illustrates how new market models of journalism can have more subtle, but particularly important effects on the field. For example, without the need to generate revenue through advertising, digitally native news nonprofits have changed traditionally codified industry-wide routines and produced more public service journalism than for-profit counterparts (i.e., Konieczna, 2014, 2018). However, there is a downside to this perceived freedom to produce more public service journalism, as journalists at
organizations with a weaker market orientation do feel like they have more autonomy, but also fear for the loss of their job constantly (Ferrucci, 2018). As was the case in the 20th century, a series of case studies also illustrated how market orientation—and the structure of a market model—can have significant effects on content, with it affecting everything from frames, source choices, length of story and role enactment (Ferrucci, 2015a,b). Market orientation can also affect how a news organization utilizes technology (Ferrucci, 2017; Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Tandoc & Thomas, 2015). It is clear, then, that a news organization’s market orientation can affect news production processes in a variety of different manners (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Shoemaker and Vos (2009) identify market orientation as an organizational-level influence on the gatekeeping process, essentially contending that market orientation can directly influence journalism practice throughout the processes associated with gatekeeping or news production.

**Gatekeeping Theory**

Traditionally, in research concerning journalism, the concept of the gatekeeper is a metaphor often applied to singular journalist making decisions about what becomes news (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). First studied and popularized by White (1950), who examined how and why a wire editor at a Midwestern newspaper decided on what stories to publish and which to not run, the metaphor of gatekeeper is “a mid-20th century expression” that describes how “for more than a century, journalists have claimed a special responsibility—and ability—to decide what is news” (Vos & Finneman, 2017, p. 265). In more recent research, though, scholars rarely study the individual gatekeeper, but rather the act of the gatekeeping (Reese & Ballinger, 2001), or the “the process by which a single piece of information gets chosen, transformed, and morphed into the digestible messages that reach people every moment of every day” (Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2017, p. 103). Ostensibly, this shift in foci makes complete sense because the process of gatekeeping is not a practice decided upon by a singular journalist (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). On the contrary, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) provided a framework for studying gatekeeping on five different levels of analysis: the individual, the communication routines, the organizational, the social institution and social system levels. The individual level involves studying communication workers or journalists and how their individual demographics and characteristics affect news production. The communication routines level focuses on practices, procedures and news values that are perceived as stable and occurrent across the entire field of journalism. The organizational level examines media ownership and other factors that are determined by individual organizations. The social institutional level looks at influence from outside organizations, both official and unofficial, such as foundations or the audience. Finally, the social system level examines constructs such as culture (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). These levels occur within a hierarchy, so while some news production routines are normative across the field of journalism, some can be organization-dependent (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). For example, when studying routines implemented due to the utilization of web analytics in newsrooms, both Hanusch (2017) and Ferrucci (2020) found that individual organizations could dictate news production routines that, in some cases, would be considered verboten and unethical in other newsrooms.
This study is focused on the organizational level of analysis. Organizations make numerous decisions that affect news production processes and, therefore, content produced. Some organizational-level variables that research illustrates significantly affects news production include technology adoption, socialization, funding streams, market orientation, staff size and leadership choices. In general, organizations make decisions in all the aforementioned areas and those decisions catalyze news production processes within that organization/newsroom. For example, who is charged with leading a newsroom can affect routines enacted, ethical decisions and the overall focus of coverage (i.e., Groves & Brown, 2020; Ryfe, 2013; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). At the Athletic, one of the organizational founders and leaders’ primary decisions that should, theoretically, affect news production is the site’s funding model, which relies on venture capital for initial funding and subscriptions for long-term success (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Gordon, 2018). The Athletic sits behind a paywall, meaning only subscribers can read content; the paywall is one of the more market-oriented funding models historically (Kaye & Quinn, 2010). When content sits behind a paywall, especially a paywall at a topic-centric news organization such as the Athletic, a news organization must make decisions that attract a large subscriber base because this is the way profits are made (Kaye & Quinn, 2010). More saliently, the founder of the Athletic recruited a large base of highly paid journalists, along with more inexpensive journalists and hundreds of staff members. The only revenue coming into the company, besides a small amount of advertising on podcasts, is through subscriptions. Therefore, a dedication to growing subscribers is imperative for the Athletic’s survival. The founders believed that this subscription growth would come if the company provided quality sports journalism through a platform visually pleasing, something the content legacy media fails at (Draper, 2017). This funding model poses many normative quandaries because it forces the organization to think of its audience as customers, rather than citizens (McManus, 1992), and that can be potentially negative because “if journalism is to help bring about the common good, it must provide the public with more than just what the public wants” (Tandoc & Thomas, 2015, p. 244). In the case of the Athletic, the organization primarily covers sports and does not, on the whole, do public affairs reporting or the like. However, it still must make a distinction about its audience or subscribers and it still must decide whether to treat those subscribers as customers or citizens (McManus, 1994). If they are customers, then decisions concerning content will be made around wants, often determined through analytics or, specifically, click rates. If they are citizens, the sports journalists retain far more autonomy over coverage. The manifestation of taking on a more strongly market-oriented funding model can be seen in journalism’s application of web analytics, which, studies illustrate, are incorporated into news production processes differently depending on market orientation; a more strongly market-oriented uses analytics and other forms of technology not to strengthen democracy, per se, but to give its audience what it wants (Sommer & Krebs, 2016; Tandoc, 2014; Zamith et al., 2020), something that, on the surface, it would seem the Athletic must do.

Launched in January 2016, the Athletic is currently structured rather unusually for a news organization (its purchase by the New York Times Company may eventually change this). Over the last 5 years, the Athletic, which began only covering Chicago sports, launched more than 45 vertical beats in cities across the country. For example, the vertical the Athletic Boston started in April of 2018 with fewer than 10 total
employees (reporters and editors) on staff (Leahy, 2019). Besides each local vertical with journalists covering beats or specific teams in each city or state, the Athletic also employs national writers who cover entire sports (Ferrucci, 2021). For example, renowned baseball writer Ken Rosenthal writes about the sport at large. In short, the Athletic combined the appeal of local sports coverage with national coverage from known writers to create a business valued at more than US$300 million (Koo, 2019).

This study aims to understand how the somewhat strongly market-oriented organization the Athletic made news production decisions during the pandemic. When the shutdown of sports occurred in the United States on March 11, 2020, the Athletic found itself in a predicament: It needed to satisfy a subscriber base by covering sports when no sports occurred. This study, with market orientation and gatekeeping theory as conceptual frameworks, attempts to understand the influences on news production at the Athletic during the pandemic. Therefore,

**RQ1:**

In what ways do market orientation affect news production during a pandemic at the Athletic?

**RQ2:**

What other organizational-level factors affect news production during a pandemic at the Athletic?

**Method**

To answer the aforementioned research questions, this study employed in-depth interviews with 43 journalists employed full-time by the Athletic. In-depth interviews as a methodology allows researchers the ability to better understand participants’ perception, to more optimally comprehend subjects’ “internal experiences” in a way that other methods do not (Weiss, 1994, p. 1). In effect, the in-depth interview permits the researcher to understand the perceptions, motivations, reasoning and emotions supporting the behaviors and experiences of participants (Spradley, 1979). To conduct in-depth academic interviews, researchers often create a traditional interview protocol, but also leave much room for follow-up questions (McCacken, 1988). When conducting these interviews, there are three main goals: summary, interpretation and integration (Weiss, 1994). If done properly, the in-depth interview can provide “the reasons why people act in particular ways, by exploring participants’ perceptions, experiences and attitudes” (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001, p. 219).

The interviews for this article occurred between May 2020 and February 2021. Of the 43 interviews, 10 occurred within May and June of 2020, when major sports in the United States, the ones the Athletic covers, were suspended. These journalists came from 27 different geographically determined verticals (the Athletic Boston, the Athletic Denver, etc.). The participants cover all four major American professional sports and one covers college athletics. Finally, the subjects are predominantly beat reporters for specific teams, but the participants do include nine journalists covering sports on a
national level. Interviews averaged roughly 35 min. Participants included 34 men and nine women; the researcher recruited interviewees through email pitches and then conducted Zoom calls. The researcher reached out to more than 90 potential participants to recruit to the 43. The participants’ average years of experience in professional journalism slightly exceeded 13 years. Finally, the researcher’s institutional review board approved the interview protocol for this study and participants received no compensation. Participants were granted anonymity up-front to facilitate more honest and potentially critical comments. The researcher, as done in similar studies, stopped conducting interviews for this study once new data no longer provided new information, a moment often labeled a saturation point (Guest et al., 2020; Weiss, 1994; Table 1).

### Data Analysis

Once the researcher transcribed the in-depth interviews, they employed a qualitative data analysis following the process outlined by Emerson et al. (2011). This procedure includes three steps. First, the memo stage includes a close reading of the data and then writing notes concerning all interesting passages or thoughts. Second, the open-coding stage involves a close line-by-line reading of the data in attempt to unearth themes and patterns. The final stage, called focus coding, includes reading through the data one more time, this time with themes and patterns in mind, categorizing and beginning a rough draft of the findings section.

### Findings

#### Impact of Market Orientation

The first research question asked how market orientation affected news production at the *Athletic* during a pandemic. After a thorough analysis of the data, three themes catalyzed from market orientation emerged: more collaboration, out-of-the-box thinking and more diversity in content.

| League covered | Beat     | Number |
|----------------|----------|--------|
| NBA            | Local    | 8      |
| MLB            | Local    | 7      |
| NHL            | Local    | 6      |
| NFL            | Local    | 13     |
| NBA            | National | 2      |
| MLB            | National | 2      |
| College Football | National | 1     |
| NFL            | National | 4      |
| Total          |          | 43     |
More collaboration

Due to the nature of the Athletic, a site with a paywall and a revenue model built almost solely on subscribers, journalists knew they had to continue publishing stories at the same pace as before the pandemic. This affected journalists in different ways at different times. Regardless of when interviews occurred—early in the pandemic when various leagues had suspended operations or by early 2021 when sports returned but under different circumstances for journalists—the most prevalent impact of market orientation, according to participants, involved more collaboration. Journalists believed to continue publishing high-quality journalism at similar intervals; they needed to collaborate with co-workers more often. “You need something different,” explained one NBA journalist. “And with limited access, everyone’s writing the same stuff. We have such a huge and varied company, though, that there is an overwhelming opportunity for partnering on stories.” As an example, one reporter discussed writing a story about COVID-19 testing protocols about the sport they covered. Instead, they reached out to others covering other leagues and came up with a comprehensive piece about all sports. “That’s not necessarily something I couldn’t have done (at my old job),” said the journalist, “but it was so much easier here.”

In other instances, numerous participants discussed using the pandemic to produce more stories about sports and analytics, something they could only accomplish, in most cases, because the Athletic employs numerous reporters focusing extensively on analytics. “It’s kind of cool,” said one analytics-focused reporter. “Usually, I just find trends and write about them myself, but now I’m helping others with stories.” Another journalist specializing in data mentioned that reporters keep reaching out with potential ideas. “And because I come from a certain perspective,” they said. “A collaboration will start with a question . . . And then I’ll look it up and I’ll say, ‘Whoa, you know, there’s something kind of interesting here; let’s broaden this out.’” Overall, the organization’s large workforce and the need for quality journalism emboldened staff to turn to each other for collaboration. “It’s something,” said one baseball journalist, “that we’ll definitely continue when this (pandemic) is over. A lot of great work is coming from a bad time, actually.” While collaboration is becoming more prevalent in journalism overall, participants perceived collaboration at the Athletic as something supported and encouraged by leadership, but not necessarily forced. They did note that some stories, such as ones where every beat writer for teams within a particular league answer the same question, did involve forced collaboration; they believed this was rare. They also overwhelmingly discussed how the sheer staff size at the Athletic made collaboration far easier to accomplish.

Out-of-the-box thinking

Especially early in the pandemic, without games to cover but a website to populate, the Athletic journalists found themselves brainstorming for story ideas that would not typically find a home on the site. Right after the onset of the pandemic, leaders at the Athletic made a decision to embrace nontraditional stories. Journalists at the organization communicate consistently through the business communication online platform Slack, which allows members of the organization to communicate with each other across multiple “channels” dedicated to various subjects. “We started a Slack channel called ‘Let’s Get Weird,’” recalled baseball journalist. “And everybody, whenever they just had a weird-ass idea that was not even really that close to sports, posted in
there. And really great pieces came out of that.” Beyond simply ideas originally posted on Slack, journalist felt encouraged to come up with ideas about topics they normally would avoid. “I’ve worked hard to not compromise (on quality) during the quarantine, and I just needed to figure out how to do that at first,” said NHL reporter. “Really, what I’ve learned, and I think a lot of us have, is that a good story is a good story and people come to the Athletic for good stories, no matter how weird they are.”

In another example, a journalist covering professional basketball talked about producing more content about athletes off the court: “I would say that most people (following the team I cover) aren’t interested in what so and so does on his day off, you know?” But, the participant noted, during COVID-19, that changed:

> How are players staying in shape? Are teammates communicating or practicing? What video games are they playing? These are some questions that become story ideas that people really like, but I wouldn’t have done before. Now I might revisit these ideas even after a vaccine.

The vast majority of participants consistently noted how the need to produce content for paying subscribers categorically provided an impetus to start to think of the idea of sports journalism more broadly, which led to out-of-the-box thinking. “Look, it’s August, and I don’t see this going away soon,” explained a football writer. “For us to make people want to stay subscribing or get new ones, we need stories others places don’t have. That means finding odd angles, but it means doing it with good reportage in mind.”

**More diversity in content**

While the last theme discussed, in different wording, diversity in terms of topic of story, numerous Athletic journalists also discussed how the pandemic and the need to produce content resulted in more gender and racial diversity in both topic and sourcing. One baseball reporter said,

> In the past, I probably would have thought twice about my story on the future of women (in the sport I cover). I’m not sure subscribers would have liked it. But I knew it was important to write and my editors supported that and you know that I was fortunate to see that people read it.

Another reporter discussed using time while the sport they covered delayed its opening to investigate diversity in the sport’s leadership. “It’s not something I would have done normally,” said the football reporter, “but with COVID, there was time and it’s a really important story that would normally get lost.”

Many reporters cited the killing of George Floyd in late May as a catalyst for reporting on race in a way the site typically would have shied away from. One basketball reporter said,

> Well, right, I’m not saying the Athletic wouldn’t have covered it because it became a sports story, of course. But when it happened, during COVID, without much sports actually happening, that let so many of us discuss social justice and racial justice in a way we just would not have had the bandwidth for otherwise.
And I think it told us all that people care about this, and you just can’t separate sports from what’s going on in society. Athletes, journalists, we all live in society and feel the same pressures and concerns as everybody else.

For many journalists interviewed, Black Lives Matter protests and what they perceived as a combative response from the U.S. government made social justice an integral part of their beats during the pandemic. One participant covering professional football summed up how the Athletic, with its paywall and need for subscribers, differed from other places they worked in the past. “When I was at (a large newspaper), I’m sure I would have been reassigned till (the sport I cover came back),” they said. “Here that didn’t happen and I was able to cover social justice. That meant a lot to me, but also probably earned some respect for me in the locker room.”

**Other Organization-Level Factors Impacting Newswork**

This study’s second research question asked, besides market orientation, what other organization-level factors affected newswork at the Athletic during the pandemic. An analysis of the data found that three factors, in varying manners, affected news production: leadership, staff size and technology adoption.

**Leadership**

The most prevalent organization-level factor besides market orientation, according to participants, involved the role of leadership. Consistently, journalists interviewed credited Athletic founders Alex Mather and Adam Hansmann with charting a path forward for the organization and its content once the pandemic began. One football beat writer explained it thusly:

> When everything started, we all felt our sphincter tighten and thought, “Oh, my God, this thing is just dead now, dead in the water.” Then we had this big all-hands meeting and one of the co-founders got up there and said, you know, he gave a kind of rousing emotional speech at some point that ended with, like, “We’re going to fucking walk away. We’re going to walk away with some scars, but we’re going to fucking walk away.” So then it was sort of, like, this is what we are; we’re going to survive.

Numerous journalists also noted the attitudes and outlooks of the founders as something that provided the freedom to do the kind of journalism necessary to survive and thrive during the pandemic. They contended that the founders afforded employees the resources and confidence to flourish throughout COVID-19. Many, though, also pointed to decisions made by Mather and Hansmann early on as vital to operating during the pandemic. “These guys hired with something in mind that’s oddly rare nowadays,” said one national journalist, “and that’s experience.” They said that because the founders employed a predominantly veteran staff, journalists across the organization already had numerous sources and contacts and, therefore, did not have to rely on Zoom teleconferences for story ideas and quotes. “I’m not always able to ask (players) the questions one on one in the same way that I used to,” remarked one participant covering hockey, “but I do get to leverage the relationships. I’ve built those over time
and they’re coming handy and are necessary more than ever. I can’t imagine doing this job, right now without them.” Over and over, veteran journalists noted their experience as something helping them, but even younger, less experienced reporters pointed to the unofficial mentorship situations the founders set up for them. “Everyone else at (my vertical),” said one very inexperienced journalist covering baseball, “is really great with helping me with sources right now.”

**Staff size**

While implicitly mentioned as part of the theme of collaboration during in the first research question, the very large, relatively, journalistic staff at the *Athletic* also contributed to news production during the pandemic. Not including the fact that the staff size makes quality collaboration more attainable, the sheer size of the staff also affects newswork. For example, numerous participants noted that at prior jobs, where sports department staff did not amount to even 10% of the *Athletic*’s staff, they assume they would have either been reassigned or, more saliently, forced to produce content in a quicker manner. “If I wasn’t made to cover (a city’s) vaccine rollout plan,” predicted one NBA beat reporter, “I would have been left in a decimated department cranking out three stories a day. On what? I don’t know.” That reporter went on to note that the size of the *Athletic* staff meant reporters could publish content when it was ready, not necessarily needed. “Just because we’re so huge,” they said, “we still have plenty of stories every day. It gives me time to make my stuff the best it can be.” Journalists reiterated, consistently, the notion that while content remained vitally important to the organization’s economic outlook, staff size made it possible not to rush journalism:

*The mission of this place isn’t to produce crap just to produce crap. It’s about quality, longform work. And pandemic or not, we’re still able to do that because, just like before, we have enough people that we don’t have to sweat if stories are ready on any given day.*

While reporters mentioned the first two effects of staff size listed here most frequently, some also noted that the large staff of the organization allowed for more brainstorming partners. One reporter covering football, for example, noted, “I call (co-workers) all the time and talk through stuff. If one call is, I don’t know, not fruitful, another will be.”

**Technology adoption**

Two forms of technology adopted by the *Athletic* affected news production during a pandemic. Both of these affect journalists’ routines at all times, but participants felt their influences were particularly noticeable during COVID-19. First, as previously mentioned, journalists believed the adoption of Slack contributes significantly to news construction, particularly story ideas. “Typically,” said one football journalist, “I’m around other journalists all the time (on my beat), so we talk and ideas flow. That happens when journalists are together. Right now (during COVID-19), Slack takes the place of that for me.” Other journalists called Slack their “lifeline” during the pandemic, intimating that it acts as almost like a newsroom in terms of keeping staff together and, as one baseball reporter noted, “keeping my creative juices flowing.”
While the majority of major sports journalists across the country, and almost all at the *Athletic*, rarely if ever step foot in a traditional newsroom, participants stressed that during the pandemic, the need for workplace community became especially acute and Slack filled that role. “Honestly, it helped my journalism,” said one basketball reporter, “but as someone who lives alone, the comradery helped my mental health too.”

The second form of technology consistently mentioned by journalists concerned the software used for reader comments. The *Athletic*, like most news organizations, encourages reader comments and places them at the bottom of stories. Unlike many other places, though, readers sign up through their subscriber account and processes are in place to immediately delete ones deemed uncivil. “I try to always read comments here because the conversations (in stories at the *Athletic*) are kind of amazing,” said one football writer, “but, particularly now, they’ve been really helpful for story ideas.” Reporters expressed that sentiment consistently. “I tell friends who work other places that sometimes I get, like, ideas from the comments section and they can’t believe it,” said one hockey reporter. “But that’s a real perk of working here. And it’s been such a big boost to me now.”

**Discussion**

When discussing the rise of new market models in journalism and the adoption of new technologies meant to gauge audience interests, Tandoc and Thomas (2015) warned about the future of ethics in journalism. They contended that the more news organizations focused on amassing large audiences, the more likely they would run afoul of normative journalism practices. As an organization supported by arguably the most market-oriented funding possible in venture capital firms and relying on subscribers for economic revenue, the *Athletic*, for the first handful of years of its existence, was seemingly the exact category of organization the authors feared; venture-capital-funded news sites are typically more focused on technology and innovation than strengthening journalistic norms (Carlson & Usher, 2016). And these reservations remain well founded as prior research illustrates the potentially deleterious effects of a strong market orientation. Eristwhile studies overwhelmingly show that organizations with a market orientation on the stronger side of the continuum posited by Beam (1998) and Ferrucci (2020) publish more stories than organizations with a weaker market orientation (Ghiglione, 1984), but less civic-minded journalism and content with more homogeneous sources. Almost four decades ago, McManus (1994) conducted numerous case studies of broadcast newsrooms beginning to practice more market-oriented journalism. He found that these newsrooms cared less about quality stories and more about garnering as many viewers as possible; this led them toward producing content that skirted the line between journalism and entertainment (McManus, 1992). One of the most fundamental normative philosophies in journalism concerns the figurative—and sometimes literal—wall that separates a journalism organization’s business and editorial functions (Coddington, 2015). It is organizations such as the *Athletic* that scholars like Tandoc and Thomas (2015) contended could subtlety dismantle that wall due to a need to amass valuation for its venture capital funders. In the case of the *Athletic*, theoretically, when COVID-19 hit and the organization needed to publish stories about sports that were not functioning, prior work suggests the organization would devolve into a hot-take-filled website similar to many populating the sports news ecosystem (Buzzelli et al., 2020).
This study’s findings contradict those prognostications, at least in the current situation for the *Athletic*. For obvious reasons, journalism studies scholarship often warns about the perils of big business or corporations invading the field. But, here, with the *Athletic*, it is possible to envision some clear benefits of a somewhat strong market orientation. It is, in fact, clear for multiple reasons that the *Athletic*, despite its market orientation, treats its audience more like citizens versus customers (McManus, 1995). First, the influx of money from various venture capital firms allowed the organization to build a large and experienced staff, one that leveraged its years in the field into gaining access to sources and stories during the pandemic that others could not. The sizable staff also provided a larger group for collaboration, something participants noted as extremely important for generating quality content during COVID-19. Three decades ago, while acknowledging some negative effects of group ownership in journalism, Lacy (1991) also found that the larger staffs at these types of organizations provided innumerable benefits. This study finds that still to be the case. The journalists interviewed for this study also consistently noted that the paywall employed by the *Athletic* provided an impetus to dependably publish quality journalism, even early in the pandemic when no sporting events occurred. This impetus catalyzed diversity—something all news organizations should strive for—in two different ways. First, it forced reporters to think about covering sports more broadly, which resulted in stories that went far beyond typical game stories or features on athletes. As one participant said, “We went weird and I don’t think there’s any going back. It worked.” Second, reporters began writing about subjects previously uncovered or only barely covered: social justice, race and gender. Once again, not only did readers appreciate this material according to the journalists interviewed; it also broadened the scope of sports journalism in general. Therefore, while the *Athletic*’s structure, mission and goals may change due to its purchase by the New York Times Company, the results of this study remain important as they illustrate how the organization’s model succeeded during the pandemic. A key main takeaway for this study, one that should be obviously tested in a variety of manners in the future, is that the audience seemingly desired high-quality content from the *Athletic* and it did not matter that they did not receive game analyses, for example, during the early pandemic. In short, despite much foundational research into market-driven news, the *Athletic* illustrates an audience desire for citizen-focused news and not necessary the market-driven variety often provided by strongly and somewhat strongly market-oriented organizations (Ferrucci, 2020; McManus, 1994). This could be extrapolated out to mean that news organizations of all types and sizes might find it more economically beneficial to invest in high-quality news coverage, regardless of subject matter, rather than cutting quality in an effort for short-team economic gains.

Moreover, when discussing theories in communication involving a hierarchical structure much like the model of gatekeeping utilized here that originated with Shoemaker and Vos (2009), Kuhn (2012) argued that research consistently focuses extensively on micro and macro levels while overlooking the organization. This is also true with gatekeeping research, which, until very recently, examined the “micro” levels such as individual characteristics of journalists and communication routines and also the “macro” levels such as social institutions and the social system, but infrequently inspected organizational-level influences. This study illustrates the potential power of organizational-level variables (Ferrucci & Kuhn, 2022; Shoemaker & Vos,
Market orientation, leadership, staff size and technological adoption all affected news production at the Athletic. As journalism becomes a less homogeneous industry with new market models becoming part of the field’s ecosystem (Kaye & Quinn, 2010), certainly more research on organizations is warranted.

This study comes with limitations. First, as interview research, it is subject to the perceptions of participants. A relatively large sample size hopefully assuages that somewhat, but in-depth interviews, like all methodological approaches, include unavoidable limitations. This study is also limited by its participant pool, which includes only full-time reporters. The perceptions of leadership or noneditorial employees would undoubtedly unearth differing perceptions, but, as with all similar studies, it is believed there is much value in journalists’ perceptions. Future work could attempt to better understand how perceptions from leadership mesh with journalistic perceptions, especially as leadership makes many decisions directly affecting journalism practice. Second, as previously noted, interviews took place over a 9-month period during the pandemic and perceptions might have shifted for participants depending on when the interview occurred.

While this study examines news production at the Athletic during a pandemic, its results portend to having an impact long after COVID-19. First, practical takeaways indicate focusing on quality, not simply responding to audience wants, can have both short- and long-term benefits to an organization. In the case of the Athletic, when the sporting world went dark, reporters looked for new and important stories to tell and, instead of circulation crumbling, it actually increased (Sherman, 2020). Also, the manner in which the Athletic commits to quality, by employing a large staff and adopting technology that allows for quality engagement, can be replicated. For example, while ESPN still earns revenues that dwarf most every other journalistic operation, its choice to decimate staff during the pandemic and before, all in pursuit of a greater stock valuation (Deitsch, 2020), could negatively affect the company in the long run because fewer journalists means fewer quality stories. Finally, and potentially most importantly, this study’s results show that regardless of organizational size, focusing on quality and practicing sports journalism in a broad sense—not simply providing bloated opinions or traditional game stories—can actually increase audience size, therefore delivering both positive economic and journalistic results.

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