

The Power of Sport Communication: Bridging Divides and Inspiring Change

Hayden V. Coombs

Editor-in-Chief, Utah Journal of Communication

Assistant Professor of Sport Communication, Southern Utah University

Suggested Citation:

Coombs, H. V. (2024). The power of sport communication: Bridging divides and inspiring change. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 46–48. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905031>

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire, it has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope, where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination.”

– Nelson Mandela

These powerful words from President Nelson Mandela capture the essence of this special issue of the *Utah Journal of Communication*—Sports Communication. Sports possess a unique ability to transcend boundaries, unite people, and inspire change. Mandela’s words are a reminder of how sports can reflect the values of society, catalyze social progress, and elevate voices that may otherwise go unheard.

As Editor-in-Chief, I am delighted to introduce this issue, which highlights the crucial role sports play in shaping both individual and collective identities while fostering societal transformation. This issue is dedicated to exploring how sports communication transcends mere entertainment, becoming a tool for advocacy, representation, and cultural progress.

Sports communication goes far beyond physical contests; it serves as a strategic tool for sports organizations to reflect their values,

communicate with fans, and showcase the accomplishments of athletes (Billings et al., 2017). This multifaceted discipline fosters a culture that balances competition with personal growth, embracing innovations such as augmented reality, personalized digital content, and the rise of esports. These technologies engage fans, promote events, and address pressing contemporary issues such as athlete compensation, mental health, and gender equality, while also considering the evolving legal and ethical standards that define modern sports (Coombs, 2024). When viewed through this lens, sports become a universal language that resonates with the complexities of society. This language reflects shared struggles, values, and aspirations, while connecting and shaping communities across the globe.

As sports communication continues to evolve, it has emerged as a dynamic, interdisciplinary academic field that encompasses cultural, social, and political dimensions. The research presented in this issue reflects the diversity and richness of the field, with contributions from both established scholars such as Dr. Andrew Dix, Dr. James Bingaman, and Dr. Karen Hartman, as well as emerging voices like Dr. Casey Rudzinski and Logan Gibbs. Collectively, their work pushes the boundaries of inquiry and expands our understanding of the cultural impact of sports. This issue is a testament to the

growing recognition of sports communication as an essential field of study that bridges the gap between theory and practice.

This special issue of the UJOC aligns perfectly with our mission to foster scholarly debate and innovation. The rise of digital and social media has transformed how sports are consumed, understood, and discussed. This issue delves into key trends and challenges in the ever-evolving media landscape, exploring topics such as the portrayal of female athletes, the role of digital platforms in shaping fan engagement, and the influence of social media on athletes' personal brands. Furthermore, it honors foundational scholars who have helped establish sports communication as a legitimate academic field. Scholars such as Andrew C. Billings, Paul Turman, and Michael L. Butterworth have laid the groundwork for the field, and their pioneering work has created a strong foundation upon which future research can build.

This issue is particularly significant to me, as my own academic career is deeply rooted in sports communication, sports management, and athletic administration. From my personal experience, I have seen how sports transcend mere entertainment and reflect broader societal values, identities, and collective experiences (Coombs et al., 2023). In this way, sports connect people across borders and cultures, reinforcing our intrinsic need for community and human connection. Whether it is a global event like the Olympics or a local high school game, sports provide a common language that bridges social, economic, and political divides. It is through communication that these connections are made possible, and this issue explores the ways in which sports communication fosters these powerful relationships.

The research presented in this issue spans a wide array of topics, each highlighting a different aspect of sports communication. For example, media framing in sports is a crucial area of study that examines how athletes, teams, and events are portrayed in the media. This framing can shape public perceptions and influence broader conversations around issues such as race, gender, and nationality. Scholars such as Dr. Andrew C. Billings have laid the groundwork for this field by examining how media representations of athletes reinforce or challenge societal stereotypes. The research presented in this issue builds upon that legacy, offering new insights into the ways media framing affects the cultural significance of sports.

Among the diverse perspectives presented are studies on media framing and visual rhetoric in Division II women's college softball (Dix, 2024), international athlete representation in American

football (Bingaman, 2024), and a historical analysis of the Fort Shaw Girls Basketball Team as a counterhegemonic force against the Indian School system (Hartman, 2024). Additional research examines social-emotional wellness in athletics (Rudzinski, 2024) and organizational dynamics within collegiate sports, particularly in the context of the transfer portal (Gibbs, 2024).

Digital culture is also a focus, with studies on how sports betting platforms use memes to build community (Rawlins, 2024). Other contributions analyze crisis communication in professional sports scandals, such as Trevor Bauer's misconduct case (Scovill, 2024), and explore topics like the Utah Jazz rebrand and fan reactions to MLB's pitch clock (Greenhalgh, 2024). Collectively, this issue provides a comprehensive look at the evolving relationship between sports, media, and technology.

At its core, this special issue underscores the vitality and relevance of sports communication as an academic discipline. The work of established and emerging scholars builds on the legacy of pioneers like Billings, Turman, and Butterworth, keeping the field at the forefront of both scholarly inquiry and real-world application. As sports continue to shape identity, community, and culture, the study of how they are communicated will only grow in importance.

The research in this special issue has the potential to foster interdisciplinary collaborations, not only within sports communication but also across fields such as sociology, psychology, media studies, and political science. The insights offered can be applied to diverse contexts, from improving sports policy and athlete welfare to enhancing media representation and public engagement. As sports continue to shape cultural expression and social change, effective communication is crucial. I hope this issue serves as a valuable resource for scholars, students, and professionals, sparking further exploration and innovations in the field of sports communication.

Thank you for your continued support of the Utah Journal of Communication. I trust you will find this issue as engaging and thought-provoking as I do.

Sincerely,

Dr. Hayden Coombs
Editor-in-Chief
Utah Journal of Communication

References

- Billings, A. C., Butterworth, M. L., & Turman, P. D. (2017). *Communication and sport: Surveying the field*. Sage.
- Bingaman, J. (2024). If they can kick good more power to em: The influence of media and values on attitudes toward Australian college punters. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 55–69. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905078>
- Coombs, H. V., & Bagley, B. H. (2024). Transcending controversy: the Heisman Trophy Trust's image repair strategies following OJ Simpson's passing. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 124–128. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905363>
- Coombs, H. V., Bagley, B. H., Barnhart, R., & Graudins, M. (2023). Sociolinguistic accommodation strategies utilized by international student-athletes & their interlocutors. *Comunicação Pública*, 18(35). <https://doi.org/10.34629/cpublica.728>
- Coombs, H. V. (2024). *Communication & Administration of Intercollegiate Athletics* (1st ed.). KDP.
- Dix, A. C. (2024). Softball is not separate of visual rhetoric: Applying the theoretical perspective on visual rhetoric to umpire observations in Division II softball. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 49–54. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905057>
- Francis, T. (2024). Media framing of Southern Utah University's transition to the Western Athletic Conference. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 116–123. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905346>
- Gibbs, L. E.. (2024). They cherish us; they worship us: An examination of organizational socialization processes in Division I collegiate athletics organizations. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 84–90. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905183>
- Greenhalgh, T. (2024). MLB pitch clock: A rhetorical analysis of fan reactions in a public sphere. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 109–115. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905324>
- Hartman, K. L. (2024). The 1904 Fort Shaw gurls world champion basketball team: Sport public relations, counterhegemony, and native athletes. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 70–75. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905113>
- Martin, C. (2024). Coaching dynamics: The impact of behavioral styles on collegiate athlete's performance, motivation, and relationships. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 129–135. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905378>
- Rawlins, C. (2024). Analyzing memes from online sports betting X accounts. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 92–99. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905214>
- Rudzinski, C. (2024). The role of athletic directors in enhancing social-emotional wellness and health literacy in interscholastic schools. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 76–83. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905128>
- Scovill, P. (2024). Analyzing Trevor Bauer's image repair strategies in the wake of misconduct allegations. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 100–108. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905253>
- Taft, M. (2024). Utah Jazz 2022 rebrand: Impact on fan identity, loyalty, and purchases. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(2), 136–142. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13905392>