

# “It Has Changed Completely”: How Local Sports Broadcasters Adapted to No Sports

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When COVID-19 shut down the sports world, local sports broadcasters were without the games and events that traditionally fill the content of their shows. While national media outlets could dive deep into the archives to play old games and classic content, local sports broadcasters traditionally do not have that option. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how the jobs and daily routines of local sports broadcasters changed in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak. A cross-section of local sports broadcasters from a variety of markets was surveyed, and, based on the responses, several themes emerged: (a) an emphasis on creativity, (b) a shift in daily responsibility, (c) and an uncertain future.

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When the sports world went dark in March 2020, national media outlets had to scramble to fill their empty sports schedules. They did so mostly by turning to the past. CBS Sports showed classic National Collegiate Athletic Association men’s basketball games, Major League Baseball Network showcased great opening days of the past, and Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) resorted to showing old professional wrestling events (Cafardo, 2020; Kelly & Casella, 2020; Shapiro, 2020).

While these national networks could turn back the clock for content, the hundreds of local sports broadcasters throughout the United States could not. These sportscasters rely on filling their segments with highlights of high school sports, interviews with coaches, and videos of local athletes doing something remarkable (Schultz & Arke, 2016). However, with all sporting events canceled, local sports broadcasters were suddenly left with no games or events to talk about (Longman, 2020). While many did the initial “what COVID-19 means for local teams and athletes” stories (Owen, 2020), those quickly dried up. College and high school athletes were sent home, and social distancing dictated that getting in-person updates from local athletes would be challenging (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Embree, 2020). The larger, national outlets could

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simply go into the archive. While local sports broadcasters do have archives, they traditionally rely almost exclusively on new games and events for content. This led to limited options for their sportscasts during this time period. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how the jobs and daily routines of local sports broadcasters changed in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak.

## Literature Review

In order to demonstrate the unique job demands of a local sports broadcaster, it is important to, briefly, distinguish between the sports segments on a national outlet such as ESPN and the sports segments on a local television station. ESPN has a digital and television audience composed of 212 million people throughout the United States each month (ESPN Press Room, 2020). Due to the national distribution of these networks, they often focus on events that are popular throughout the country, such as National Football League and National Basketball Association games (Brown, 2015). In addition, they have thousands of hours of live sports programming in their archive that they can show should events be canceled. For example, ESPN presented 83,340 hr of live studio and event programming in 2019 alone that could be aired again at a later date, if necessary (ESPN Press Room, 2020). In addition, ESPN creates its own original programming, such as the 10-part documentary, *The Last Dance*, on Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls that aired during the sports shutdown (Morris, 2020). These networks also have a deep roster of content creators. ESPN is home to more than 6,500 employees worldwide, with most employees specializing in one job, such as anchoring, reporting, shooting video, recording audio, utilizing social media, or producing shows (ESPN Press Room, 2020).

The world of local television is different. The United States is divided up into 210 television markets and, instead of being nationally seen, the sportscasts are limited to just the people living in each viewing area. A sportscaster in Miami will be on television in the Miami area but nowhere else in the country. Therefore, local sports broadcasters are encouraged to emphasize the “local” in their job title (Hull, 2017). For example, a local sports broadcaster in Montana may focus heavily on area high school sports and not as much (if at all) on professional sports because there are no professional teams in that state. Local television almost never shows full games or relies on archival footage. Instead, it focuses on what is happening that day, meaning that there is almost no option of showing older materials should the need arise. Finally, a local sports broadcaster is often just one of two people working in the entire department. In a 2019 survey of local sports broadcasters who had been on the job for less than 5 years, more than two thirds of the respondents (67.1%) said their sports department contained just two employees (Hull & Romney, 2020). That means that local sports broadcasters are not just showing highlights on the late local news but they are often the ones shooting the video for those highlights as well. These journalists are on the front lines at sporting events throughout the country, shooting video at games, reporting on them on websites, and talking about local athletes on the evening news.

However, with all events canceled, these local sportscasters could not show old games, collaborate with thousands of coworkers, or focus on national events

that could help fill the precious time during their show. Instead, they seemingly had nothing new to report on in their evening sportscast, meaning their jobs had the potential to change dramatically. Therefore, the following two research questions (RQs) were developed:

**RQ1:** What work duties were changing, if any, for local sports broadcasters during the COVID-19 sports shutdown?

**RQ2:** What changes were occurring, if any, to the evening sports broadcast for local sports broadcasters during the COVID-19 sports shutdown?

## Methods

To determine how the job of a local sports broadcaster changed in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak, a survey was sent to local sports broadcasters throughout the United States. Due to the fact that the participants were spread throughout the United States, sending the survey through e-mail was deemed the most effective way to distribute it. This method has been used in previous research regarding sports journalists (Hull, 2016; Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). The local sports broadcasters were asked 20 questions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on their job. Questions addressed topics such as how their jobs have changed, the impact on their salary and work hours, and what they believe the future might hold for the profession. These interview questions were based on pilot interviews with local sports broadcasters and the authors' observations of the content on evening sportscasts during this time. Local sports broadcasts were monitored through social media posts and the video application NewsON, which allows viewers to watch local newscasts throughout the United States on demand (About NewsOn, 2020).

A recruitment e-mail describing the study was sent to 20 local sports broadcasters throughout the United States. Ultimately, 10 agreed to participate and answer the questions. These local sports broadcasters were an equal mix of men and women with a variety of market sizes and geographical locations represented. The participants were

Liz Habib—KTTV—Los Angeles, CA (Market 2)

Kelly Price—WAGA—Atlanta, GA (Market 10)

Zak Hicken—KSL—Salt Lake City, UT (Market 30)

Alyssa Orange—KNWA—Little Rock, AR (Market 62)

Mitchell Brown—WACH—Columbia, SC (Market 75)

Tyler Shaw—KBTX—Bryant, TX (Market 82)

Lyndsey Gough—WTOG—Savannah, GA (Market 89)

Claudia Chakamian—KQDS—Duluth, MN (Market 139)

Heather Healy—KFDM—Beaumont, TX (Market 143)

John Wagoner—WVII—Bangor, ME (Market 159)

Using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965), the answers to the open-ended questions were put into various categories based on the theme of the response. Initially, the two researchers reviewed all answers individually and then

discussed emergent themes and categories together before reaching a consensus regarding the content of the answers. Creation of new categories and refinement of existing ones continued until observations did not add to the final categories.

## Results

All 10 participants reported that they were still working at their television station, with none of them having been furloughed or forced to take a pay cut. This is perhaps a surprising finding considering the dramatic impact the shutdown has had on the media (Hare, 2020; Tracy, 2020). However, for some, their job duties were changing (RQ1). Six of the 10 participants said that management was now assigning them to do some news reporting in addition to their sports duties. While many television news broadcasters throughout the country were instructed to work from home (Adams, 2020), half of the local sportscasters in this study still went into office daily and said they did not work from home at all.

Based on the responses to the open-ended questions, several themes about the changes that were occurring emerged (RQ2). These themes included (a) an emphasis on creativity, (b) a shift in daily responsibility, (c) and an uncertain future.

### Emphasis on Creativity

The immediate challenge facing local sports broadcasters was producing work remotely. Several of the respondents who had on-air responsibilities stated that they had to transform parts of their homes into pseudo-production studios. For those employed by stations with better resources, that transition went more seamlessly. Atlanta sportscaster Kelly Price described her home studio as “great.” She used “station-provided light kits, phone, tripods, [and] mobile mics . . .” to fulfill her on-air responsibilities. Liz Habib, a sportscaster in Los Angeles, was issued multiple computers, phones, and lights to use in her home. For those working in smaller markets or whose stations had fewer resources, the lack of broadcast equipment forced some creative solutions. John Wagoner (Bangor, ME—Market 159) reported recording his voice for a story to an iPhone from underneath a weighted blanket to reduce unwanted noise. However, all respondents exercised some level of creativity to fulfill their professional responsibilities. Savannah’s Lyndsey Gough wrote, “I do often have to rearrange my apartment if I am shooting something . . . and be sure to keep my dog quiet. She loves people and gets so excited when she hears voices.” Price offered how her living room became a mini studio. She placed sports props on a shelf next to her television and used the screen as a de facto studio monitor. During a live shot or standup, she uploaded a logo or graphic on the television related to the story and stood in front of it during the segment. Video and other files were transferred to essential broadcast personnel at the station via file-sharing services.

***The In-Person Interview Dilemma.*** Perhaps the most difficult challenge was the lack of interpersonal contact with those whom they were covering. Sports broadcasters rely heavily on in-person interviews—often conducted at practices, arenas, fields, in studio, or elsewhere. Unable to do so in many cases, sports broadcasters utilized nontraditional methods to perform interviews. A majority reported using

some type of teleconferencing platform, such as Skype, Zoom, Instagram, Facebook, or FaceTime to perform interviews. The poor video quality and the lack of adequate b-roll, at times, was problematic for sports broadcasters. Some felt their story quality was not as strong.

However, a few respondents reported a positive result to the televisual interview: the ability to quickly turn around soundbites for stories. Ordinarily, sports broadcasters travel to conduct interviews and bring along heavy broadcast equipment to ensure production quality. The equipment often includes camera(s), lights, and handheld or lavalier microphones. However, the teleconference eliminated the need for the equipment, and sports reporters were able to save time by quickly downloading the recorded interviews and moving on to the editing process. Interestingly, Habib even suggested that the lack of traditional television interviewing tools actually prompted deeper responses:

And here's the surprise, what we saw in so many cases, they were very different interviews. When you take away the camera and mic and court and uniform and field, and do an interview via these methods, many athletes and coaches showed a very different side of themselves. A much warmer, relaxed personal side. We have been able to advance stories about individuals, the leagues and the business of sports on a daily basis.

As some states began relaxing social distance requirements, several respondents reported that their stations purchased mic extender equipment that allowed them to perform in-person interviews while maintaining recommended social distancing protocols. Other respondents indicated that their station management directed them to shift their efforts away from the traditional broadcast and focus more on written digital content, which was posted to websites and distributed via social media.

**Creative Programming.** Despite the difficulties of producing broadcast stories and the lack of live sporting events, the majority of respondents reported that they were still producing sports segments and sports programs. Although the lack of highlights, a staple of local sports programming, forced sports teams to “think outside-the-box,” Salt Lake City’s Zak Hicken said that his team readjusted the pace of its sports programming to fewer stories and highlights. Much like some of the big national outlets, Hicken and his colleagues decided to take advantage of the station’s historical collection of sports archive footage from major sports moments that occurred in their market. The decision was a home run:

We’ve shared footage from our archive on social media and usually include a “This Day in Sports History” moment in our daily sportscast. Fans and viewers have really enjoyed reliving a lot of these moments. We still are overflowing with content on a daily basis and have been able to remain relevant.

Those working in smaller media markets with less extensive historical archives and fewer professional teams to cover were forced to lean heavily into their creativity. Tyler Shaw, a sports broadcaster in Bryant, TX, offered that “some days are easier to fill than others.” Another revealed that their job in sports “has

been greatly minimized since the start of COVID-19.” A few examples of unorthodox stories offered by these respondents include one reporter turning a story on a virtual bingo game at a local nursing home that was hosted by an area college basketball coach, whereas another story was about a local high school hosting virtual cheerleading tryouts. Other stories took a more serious tone, including the challenges facing Amateur Athletic Union basketball and the financial fallout of canceled games on minor league baseball teams.

## A Shift in Daily Responsibility

Responses were mixed when asked about sports broadcasters’ daily responsibilities. Nearly half (four, 40%) either worked entirely at home or worked mostly from home, whereas the rest either worked only occasionally from home or did not work from home at all. For those sports broadcasters who were also sports anchors, two actually anchored sports segments from their home, whereas three went into the studio.

Most respondents reported that they were still producing/reporting on daily sports content, even though it was not what they were traditionally used to. Four of the 10 reported that they were still exclusively producing sports stories, whereas another four reported mostly doing sports while occasionally helping out on nonsports stories. Two respondents in smaller media markets indicated they have moved almost entirely to news content. That most sports broadcasters were still producing sports content despite the lack of sporting events, news, and information is surprising. Perhaps it is less of a surprise as sports broadcasters indicated that much of their reporting has shifted toward telling feature stories (one respondent described them as “sportsy-news stories”). These stories generally contain more human interest elements and can cross lines between news and sports content. Columbia, SC, sports director Mitch Brown said, “I’m doing feature stories. It’s not really different from what we already do, we’re just producing more.”

**Daily Work Flow.** Sports broadcasters’ hourly work schedule varied by market and organization. Some reported that “not much has changed” or “everything is pretty much the same” in their work schedule since the lock down, whereas for others, their schedule changed more dramatically. Brown was moved to a 4-day work week; Price was moved from nightside to dayside—“a huge change for someone who rarely had consistent weekends, never had weekends off, and always worked at night.” For some, their new workspace and schedule was a dramatic slowdown from the often frenetic pace of a sports broadcaster: “I feel like I get more breaks, because I am home I can easily stop to take my dog out, grab a snack, etc. so I actually like that aspect, but it is harder to unplug when I am off, since I’m working from home.”

A number of stations had plans to travel to upcoming sporting events like the Men’s National Collegiate Athletic Association Basketball Tournament, National Basketball Association Playoffs, National Football League Draft, and/or the Summer Olympics. When those sporting events were canceled, sports broadcasters were forced to alter their schedules. Hicken felt the whiplash as his schedule came to a halt. “I went from having plans to be out of town for most of the months of March and April to suddenly begin in quasi-quarantine.”

**Social Media Strategy.** Social media platforms (SMPs) offered sports broadcasters additional ways to share their content and connect with audiences. Considering the challenges of producing live television segments, SMPs, which offer fewer technological barriers and, in some cases, wider audience reach, were not focused on during the lockdown. In fact, many respondents suggested that in regard to these platforms they maintained the status quo, albeit with a few exceptions: “It’s no different than what I have been doing” and “My content on social media has remained fairly consistent.” Many already shared most of their stories on social media and continued to do so without renewed focus. However, respondents did indicate some minor tweaks. Gough resolved to post more “positive” content on her feed, whereas Hicken reported that their team decided to share more athlete-generated content, including “Tik Tok videos, live gaming streams, or trick basketball shots” from the athletes they cover in the market. Habib decided to occasionally share unedited interviews on YouTube.

## An Uncertain Future

Although no one could know exactly how long the sports world would be on hold, the participants in the study expressed some concern about how this shutdown could impact their in-person coverage of sports in the future. With locker rooms starting to be closed to the media even before the shutdown (Beiler & Bogage, 2020), the increased use of video technology for interviews was cited by several sportscasters as something that could stay into the future. Wagoner wrote:

There is a possibility for less in-person access to athletes and coaches in the near future. I feel interview subjects are going to become accustomed to seeing and participating in Zoom and FaceTime interviews and accept that as the new normal.

Little Rock, AR, sportscaster Alyssa Orange seemed to be fine with that possibility (“Zoom is a great tool!”), while Duluth, MN’s Claudia Chakamian had doubts (“Zoom interviews stink”). Access to players and coaches may depend on the market in which a local sports broadcaster works. Those in larger markets with professional or large college teams that are more tightly controlled may see that availability dwindle. The media “scrum,” in which multiple journalists all crowd around the same athletes at the same time for an interview, may soon be a thing of the past. Shaw covers Texas A&M University and wrote, “During media availability for football, when we talk to players, there’s always a bunch of us crammed together. Something tells me this method will most likely be eliminated (which I’m grateful for).” However, as Wagoner wrote, smaller markets in which there are fewer media members and that focus more on smaller high school sports may be back to normal once social distancing is put in the past: “In a small market like this, I expect this to return to somewhat normalcy once a regular schedule returns.”

Others wondered about the long-term financial implications of this shutdown and how it may impact the future. Price wrote, “I’m curious to see if it changes station workflows,” whereas Hicken commented that the days of road trips may soon be over (“I think we will see less broadcast teams travelling to cover games in person as a way to eliminate costs”). Perhaps most troubling is the concern about their own employment. The participants in this study were fortunate that their

salary and job were unchanged, but as Orange wrote, not everyone was so lucky: “I know a lot of colleagues who have been asked to go on furlough, or have their hours cut, or even lose their jobs.”

## Discussion

Sports broadcasters’ responses to the COVID-19 crisis yielded three primary themes: an emphasis on creative problem solving and storytelling, changing responsibilities to meet local and national social distancing mandates, and an uncertain future. The impact of the shutdown could alter the local sports broadcasting landscape. Scholars have already noted that burnout is a factor in the profession as local sports broadcasters are burdened with increasing responsibilities and demands with little help or compensation (Reinardy, 2006). Therefore, perhaps the main practical implication of this research is that it brings up the question that local sports broadcasters may not want to hear: Could news leadership determine that doing even more—with less—is possible?

Atlanta’s Price revealed that her station leadership, impressed with the work she and her colleagues were doing, expressed no reason to change their current workflow: “Our GM said he has no incentive to bring us back into the station because we are so effective outside of it right now.” Hicken noted that their viewership saw little change from before the lockdown. Local sports broadcasters displayed their hard work, determination, and creativity throughout the pandemic; however, the strong performance might also suggest to management that fewer resources, higher expectations, less travel, and smaller departments may not impact viewership numbers. For sports broadcasters already facing tough job prospects—especially for minorities and females (Hull & Romney, 2020; Sheffer & Schultz, 2007)—increasing burnout rates (Hull & Romney, 2020; Reinardy, 2006), and limited resources (Reinardy, 2012), suggesting they do more with less would likely exacerbate the exodus of experienced broadcasters. A study of the broadcast industry suggested that many reporters already see their jobs “as a three-to-five-year-type of profession. Just a lot of turnover” (Woodruff, 2020, p. 40). Higher turnover rates would ultimately harm the industry. Smaller markets are especially susceptible to burnout. If local sportscasters leave these positions that are often used as opportunities for development, ultimately it would leave fewer qualified local sports broadcasters to fill medium and large market positions.

Another practical implication is that the continued focus on the televised product, and not social media, was, perhaps, surprising. As fewer and fewer viewers tune into local newscasts (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017), digital platforms and SMPs offer new ways to build/strengthen online communities, control brand management, distribute content, and develop possible new revenue streams. The lockdown, the difficulties of producing live television, and the reality that many potential viewers were in front of screens more than usual appeared to be an opportune time for local sports broadcasters to strategically develop content for these platforms, yet the respondents offered little indication that this was the case. A single respondent suggested that the website became the priority, and only one indicated any difference in how she approached SMPs (“I share a lot more of my content on social”), although this response offered little insight into a developed strategy as to how social media was used differently during this time.



For most, they continued to utilize social media as they had prior to the lockdown (“I’m still sharing all of my stories on social media like usual” and “It’s no different than what I have been doing”). This may be a missed opportunity for local sports broadcasters to build new audiences, strengthen their digital presence, and experiment with SMP content. Broadcasters are wary not to dilute the telecast whereby they generate a majority of station revenue, which may explain the trepidation toward other platforms; however, losing viewership to emergent local sports media (such as microsports sites like those hosted by SB Nation, 24/7 Sports, Sports Illustrated, among others) should be a concern.

Sports broadcasters reoriented their focus to include more feature storytelling of local athletes. A challenge for local sportscasters is not to lose sight of local audiences. Local sportscasters are immersed in national and regional sports news and information and this can seep into their sports content. However, sports viewers turn to national and regional sports organizations for that type of sports news and information. By renewing their focus on local athletes, local sports broadcasters draw deeper connections to the audiences who would be most connected with their content (“I believe feature stories were always essential to staying relevant in local sports”). In addition, these stories are among the work local sportscasters find most rewarding (“I’m proud of those. I’m also proud of telling stories of our community in untold ways”). One respondent believed that the stronger focus on features would make them a better journalist (“I think it will help me in the long run because I’m still working on my writing and storytelling skills”).

## Limitation and Future Research

A possible limitation of this paper is that the survey was sent to the local sports broadcasters approximately 1 month into the COVID-19 sports shutdown. In that short amount of time, many of the sports broadcasters seemed energized by the opportunity to try new things (“I’m actually enjoying what’s happening right now with my work”) and were able to adapt quickly and come up with enough creative stories to last for that month. However, future researchers may wish to revisit this study if the shutdown continues into many more months.

It is possible that the answers provided by the local sports broadcasters might have been different if the survey had been sent several months later. In responding to a “thank you” e-mail from the authors after she completed the survey, one of the participants in this study wrote she would be “probably sad and tired” if she was still doing news packages and Zoom interviews in August. Therefore, there is certainly the potential for a longitudinal study involving the local sports broadcasters featured in this research.

## Conclusion

Sports broadcasters’ responses to the COVID-19 crisis highlighted their efforts to creatively problem solve and remain relevant. The lockdown offered local sports broadcasters the opportunity to refocus on local audiences and stories that really matter to them while also experimenting with new platforms like digital and social platforms wherein there remains an opportunity to grow. Nevertheless, the sports

broadcasters in this study were anxious to get back to normalcy. Chakamian may have summed it up best when she wrote, “I would gladly get hit by a line drive if that meant I was back shooting sports again.”

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