

The Booster Beat:

College Football Framing of Wins and Losses by Sportswriters and SB Nation Bloggers

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by

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Chapter I

Introduction

In today's oversaturated media market, sportswriters working for daily newspapers have to compete with a multitude of online-only outlets for readers. Gone are the days when sports fans relied solely on the hometown sportswriter for information pertaining to their favorite team. Because of the Internet, which gives anyone armed with a computer or smartphone the ability to spread information to the masses, die-hard sports fans do not have to turn exclusively to the hometown newspaper for coverage anymore. Rather, if they want to read content through the lens of other like-minded individuals, they are able to do so via sports blogs tailored to fit the fan agenda.

This significant alteration in the news dissemination process ultimately benefits sports fans because it gives them other ways to consume everyday information. Toney (2013) views the rapid digital expansion of sports coverage as a necessity since there is an infinite amount of space to fill on the Internet. Because of this, new niche blogs are constantly being introduced to the public. This influx of information, though, inevitably makes sports coverage "overstretched and overexposed." As a result, sportswriters are no longer the ones leading the national sport conversation. Instead, they are simply a part of it, along with everyone else who has a web presence (Toney, 2013, pp. 2-3).

But unlike the first fan-generated sports blogs that gained popularity during the Internet's infancy, sports blogging has evolved into multimillion dollar operations comprised of fulltime editorial staffs and owned by legitimate media entities. And perhaps nowhere is this digital transition as evident as the rapid rise of the Sport Beat (SB) Nation brand of individual fan sites dedicated to nearly every professional and major college team.

Five years after it was founded as Athletics Nation – a blog that provided analysis and commentary on the Oakland Athletics of Major League Baseball – in 2004, SB Nation secured a \$5 million investment from “a group of digital media and technology luminaries” (Fisher, 2008), which helped it expand to its current lineup of 319 different fan networks that combine news, opinion, and analysis all in one place (“Directory,” n.d.). The various SB Nation blogs are some of the most active individualized sports sites on the web since they provide passionate fans with a sense of belonging within the larger in-group (Simons, 2014).

Alternatively, though they do not actively accommodate the fan agenda by producing content aimed at portraying the hometown team in a positive light, sportswriters have generally been viewed as working for a newspaper’s “toy department” for their tendency to pass on hard-hitting, critical, and investigative pieces in favor of fluff stories that openly cheerlead the team on their beat to victory. As Hardin & Zhong (2010) point out, many entry-level and beginning reporters covering high school and college athletics feel as if hometown partiality is simply part of the job because of the localized audience they write for and the need to maintain relationships with sources.

Because of these two factors, sportswriters can sometimes feel conflicted. Should they forgo objectivity and frame their coverage to fit a one-sided agenda in an effort to compete with the over populous Internet sports blogs? Or should they strive to give the public the type of straight-forward, impartial coverage it cannot get anywhere else, even if it means being overly critical of the hometown team?

For one, sportswriters are often fretful of being too harsh in their coverage in an effort to please a team’s public relations department, which ultimately controls their access to players and coaches for interviews. Fan bloggers, on the other hand, are typically not credentialed media

members. Therefore, they can – in theory – frame their articles any way they chose without fearing the same repercussions as their professional counterparts.

Nevertheless, the need for sportswriters to shy away from partiality and differentiate their work from content produced by fan bloggers has been magnified in the digital age (Mahan & McDaniel, 2006, p. 463) since in-depth, original reporting and source quotations are more substantive to an audience than a blog post full of commentary or analysis.

Reinardy & Wanta (2015) view watchdog sports journalism as a necessity. Though sportswriters might receive resistance or negative feedback from a team and their readers when attempting to report on controversial or critical subjects, the audience will have a greater appreciation for their work in the long-run if it is accurate and objective (p. 203).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the partiality of hometown newspapers and niche Sports Beat Nation blogs based on the ways in which each platform frames its college football coverage. By conducting a textual analysis, this study will determine how professional sportswriters portray National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) teams, its players, coaches, and the opposition in coverage of wins and losses compared to bloggers who create content from a fan perspective.

Coverage from the beginning, middle, and end of the 2016 season pertaining to four teams (Penn State, Colorado, Notre Dame, and Ole Miss) selected based on success, or lack thereof, will be analyzed to see if sportswriters or fan bloggers are more critical in their overall coverage, thus either negating or reinforcing the “toy department” moniker.

Chapter II

Review of Related Literature

Newspapers vs. Sports Blogs

While newspapers are pressured by the constant need to be profitable and write the type of stories that will attract the largest number of readers, sports blogs are not bound by these traditional standards. Therefore, they have more flexibility in their editorial organization (Lowrey, 2006). Because of this, blogging has habitually been viewed as a way for someone to vent or freely express him or herself without the “repressive controls of traditional media” (Coleman, 2005, p. 276).

Prior to the dot-com bubble of the late-1990s, the public had to open a newspaper, watch a television sportscast, or listen to sports talk radio if they wanted information that pertained to their team’s previous game. These pre-Internet sports fans were “passive users of information” (Otto, Metz, & Ensmenger, 2012, p. 195) because they were forced to digest the material being circulated by the mainstream media without having the opportunity to be curators of their own content.

Initially, during the web’s infancy, newspapers were able to maintain readership by offering the same content published in each daily edition free online. But as advertising revenue slowly began to taper off and the business model for print publications shifted to rely on circulation revenue as much as advertising, paywalls were added to the websites of some small town and large metropolitan daily newspapers (Lever, 2016).

This move ultimately further fragmented a newspaper’s primary audience since readers could get similar sports information free of charge from other sources on the web – whether blogs, sport social media accounts, or national mainstream sites. Currently, these new avenues

tailored for fan consumption enable a team's supporters to regulate the type of material they consume since they can subscribe to sports sources that reinforce their particular set of values.

Otto et al. characterize this as:

The constructive and interactive elements of the Internet have revolutionized that image, allowing sports fans to have an increasing amount of control over the information they want to consume and allowing them at the same time to produce their own information for other fans to utilize. The uses of this new technology in sports information production range from the creation of specialized blogs and forums for specific sports or sports teams, to the uploading of audio or video from local sporting events, to providing an unofficial regulatory presence for teams, players, and coaches. (p. 195).

However, despite the traction sports blogging has received of late, bloggers are still – by and large part – not perceived as legitimate journalists by sports organizations. Because of this, they are often not entitled to the same privileges as sportswriters, such as being able to sit in the press box or receive access to players and coaches before or after a game (Kian et al., 2011).

Therefore, the work of a sports blogger is rooted in research from a variety of other media outlets in an effort to be taken seriously by the teams they are trying to promote. Since they do not have adequate resources to conduct their own reporting, sports bloggers are still reliant on information supplied by trained journalists or, at the very least, access to a television broadcast or online stream of a team's game so they can accurately report on the outcome.

The potential edge that bloggers have over sportswriters, though, is that they are able to connect with readers more since they are average fans passionately writing about a topic. And, in most instances, these individuals do not receive substantial financial compensation for their work, unlike professional reporters (Otto et al., 2011, p. 207).

Sports Journalism and Public Relations

Florida International University's (FIU) athletic communications' staff did not permit reporter David J. Neal to cover the football program's 2014 season-opening game against Bethune-Cookman University. Though the *Miami Herald* beat writer was the only South Florida journalist who regularly reported on the school's football program, he was not permitted to receive a media credential because of his critical coverage of the team (Peters, 2014).

It was not the first time that FIU terminated Neal's access to the program, though. Months before the season began, Neal was not allowed to conduct interviews with sources or observe FIU's open football practices (Ward, 2014). As a result, the *Herald* opted to not have another member of its sports staff cover the game. If Neal could not sit in the press box, the editorial staff concluded, then no one from the news organization was going to publicize the team.

In a statement issued to the *Miami Herald*, FIU backed its decision, writing, "We did not issue a media credential to the Herald's beat reporter because of concerns we have brought up to the Herald [...] about the reporter's interactions with our student athletes, coaches and staff, and the nature of the resulting coverage" (Kaufman, 2014). Naturally, this prompted the *Herald* to examine the scope of Neal's coverage on the FIU beat. And the resulting investigation found that all of his reporting was "fair and professional" (Moskovitz, 2014).

Even though his press pass was denied for FIU's opener, Neal bought a ticket to watch FIU's 14-12 loss to a Football Championship Series (FCS) team, but did not pen a recap or game story. Two days later, FIU promptly reissued his credential since it realized it needed all of the publicity it could get from the media if it wanted to compete with the University of Miami and Florida State University – two local powerhouse programs – for fans.

This case serves as a constant reminder that sportswriters are not immune to the harsh measures that teams can take in an effort to dictate or influence coverage. While sportswriters are required to uphold ethical standards and not purposely favor one side over the other, this is not always possible because of variables that are out of their control.

The media and sports teams – both at the collegiate and professional level – used to have a symbiotic relationship, one where each side depended on the other to survive (Kian et al., 2014). Sportswriters relied on the public relations department for access to sources while the team needed the media just as much to publicize its product.

But now, the dependence is not the same. Even though sportswriters still must have a professional connection with those they cover, teams do not necessarily need the media as much anymore because they have high trafficked websites and large social media followings that allow them to essentially promote themselves without the need for a traditional beat reporter (Kian et al., 2014). As a result, sportswriters can be more hesitant now, than ever, to write a controversial or critical piece that could potentially damage this already flawed relationship and axe the remaining ties that allow them to perform their job.

SB Nation Background

In a 2004 post on Athletics Nation (AN), the first SB Nation blog, founder Tyler Bleszinski compared SB Nation to the neighborhood sports bar where fans congregate to discuss the latest news, by writing, “A place where everyone knows your name and where the swivel chair at your computer becomes a bar stool upon which we will pontificate and ruminate together” (Bleszinski, 2004). Bleszinski additionally wrote that the intention of his site was not to provide his audience with impartial information, but rather give them a place to read the opinions of other loyal fans:

This site is not about journalism. It's not an unbiased and neutral source. I'm an Athletics fanatic through and through. I will always call things as I see them, but I can't promise that I won't be peering through my green and gold colored glasses. I am only capable of viewing the world as an A's follower. I consider myself a fan-columnist, in that order.

That is what this blog is and that's what you'll receive here in AN (2004).

Seven years after Bleszinski founded AN – and subsequently the SB Nation brand – the company was able to raise approximately \$23 million (“Vox Media,” n.d.) through a fundraising campaign that enabled it to brand itself as one of the top sports community fan sites, along with Bleacher Report. According to its “About” page, SB Nation is “the fastest-growing sports media brand” (“About SB Nation,” n.d.). Because the Vox Media subsidiary values the partiality of its editors and contributors, its slogan used to be “pro quality, fan perspective” (SB Nation, 2011) before changing it to “come fan with us” (Bergeron, 2017) during its May 2017 rebranding phase.

Unlike traditional newspapers, which operate with a limited staff – thus restricting the amount of content they can crank out – SB Nation articles are written by fans passionate about their specific team. As a result, new content is typically posted multiple times per day.

While writers are generally paid a flat fee per article, similar to the pay structure of a freelance journalist, each site has a lead editor who receives a monthly stipend of approximately \$200 (Corrigan, 2012, p. 4) and is responsible for ensuring that content is posted in a timely manner.

This “fan-centric” editorial policy is focused on building and maintaining online communities and provides anyone obsessed with a specific team the ability to apply to be a

contributing writer. According to its “Frequently Asked Questions” page, SB Nation will take an application from “anyone” who wants to be a paid writer for any specific blog.

But, if fans want to increase their chances in the selection process, it is recommended that they start by selecting a community that interests them (Pittsburgh Penguins, Buffalo Bills, Cleveland Cavaliers, University of Michigan, etc.) and begin creating “FanPosts,” which “allows you to showcase your thoughts, writing and opinion without having to go through a filter to get it out in the wild” (Floyd, 2013).

While the foundation of the SB Nation brand has been its online, team-focused networks, its main homepage functions as a sports news aggregator aimed at competing with other national sports news entities. Because of this, its main homepage is organized by sections that correspond to each of the four professional sports leagues, as well as Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), soccer, and college football and men’s basketball.

To decrease internal competition, SB Nation only permits one blog per professional franchise or college program. If, for example, a fan wanted to start an SB Nation-sponsored blog that pertained to a team or sport already covered, even if it aimed to produce different content, he or she would be unable to do so because of Vox’s guidelines.

By having a succinct focus, SB Nation sites have followed the trend of other online publications that have shifted their coverage from a general interest audience to a more niche group of readers. Whereas newspapers are tasked with publicizing all sports – high school, college and/or professional – in their circulation area, specialty sites exist to serve a national, yet loyal, audience. This move toward hyperlocal coverage reflects a growing trend in journalism, one that focuses on regional news blogs and online news hubs that exist to serve various cities, towns, and townships throughout the country (Craft & Davis, 2013, p. 120).

Structure of SB Nation Blogs

Each SB Nation fan blog has a managing editor tasked with choosing the editorial direction of his or her site. While the tone (optimistic, satirical, sarcastic, etc.) of each blog can depend on the culture and attitudes of the fan base, most generally have the same editorial structure, one that revolves around game stories, analysis, discussion boards/comment threads, and the occasional feature piece.

Though the play-by-play description that appears in SB Nation recaps can be as complete as that of a newspaper, lacking the ability to interview coaches and athletes after a game can detract from the content's overall significance against other reputable sources. As a result, SB Nation has become proficient at creating analysis and commentary posts in lieu of traditional recaps, such as its trademarked "Three things we learned from ..." articles. This notion aligns with a survey that found that nearly 70% of sports bloggers perceived their work as commentary ("From outside the press box," 2009).

A majority of SB Nation's observation-based articles focus specifically on what plays, lineups, and other factors have been impacting performance and why. But because SB Nation bloggers are not credentialed media members and since a passion for their team often guides their analysis, it comes off as being from a supporter's viewpoint (Feinstein, 2010), thus further separating it from the type of content being published in a newspaper's sports section.

But perhaps the biggest difference to the naked eye between newspapers and SB Nation blogs is that the latter does not make an effort to distinguish its hard news from its editorials, which ultimately blur the lines between commentary and news. Newspapers, on the other hand, clearly mark "Editorial" or "Opinion" above any article that is composed of a writer's opinion and not produced from an unbiased perspective.

Chapter III

Theoretical Framework

Sport Fandom

The groundwork of sport fandom is laid when an individual is roughly eight or nine years old and capable of concrete operational thinking. During this stage of development, an adolescent is able to form a long-term, emotional attachment with a specific sport, team, or athlete based on shared socializing agents, such as family members, the local or national media, and their own playing experiences (James, 1997).

Research has further demonstrated that fans tend to feel more associated with their favorite sports teams during periods of success on the field, court, or ice, which can have a positive effect on one's mental state. Even when an individual's social identity with his or her team is compromised due to prolonged periods of losing, he or she can utilize self-esteem boosting tactics – such as concocting excuses for poor performance or patronizing a rival – to enhance positive social identity (Phua, 2010).

When fans identify with a team, they become a part of the in-group, whether they prefer it or not. Thus, fans usually take an “us against them” mentality to provide them with a unique sense of social comfort and belonging when interacting with other supporters (Simons, 2014). End (2001) found that fans are likely to bask in reflected glory (BIRG) online when their team does well and cut off reflected failure (CORF) after a loss.

This type of BIRGing and CORFing is reflected in sports journalism since writers often jump on the bandwagon when the team on their beat is winning and become critical of every move it makes when it is losing. Though indication of BIRGing and CORFing can subtly be woven into the work produced by even the most veteran sportswriter, it is often most evident in

articles written by fan bloggers that use the pronoun “we” to signify the hometown team and “them” to designate the opposition. While fan bloggers are likely to BIRG in their team’s success, they often do not outwardly CORF, even if their team is going through a losing drought, because they are still passionate supporters through thick and thin.

Blom & Grunwald (2012) found that passion-driven content is predictable during games with major implications since writers are “often involved in the emotional context of the event, experiencing the same sensations as the audience and viewers.” However, fan affiliation varies in intensity and can take many forms. As Bryant & Raney (2000) note:

Today’s ardent sports fan adds team and player jerseys, team hats of all shapes and colors, face and body paint, and weird but clearly identifiable costumes or apparel (e.g., cheeseheads, elephant trunks). These symbols clearly mark one not only as a fan, but as a die-hard, true-blue, unadulterated, as-I-live-and-breath, in-your-face fan (p. 162).

Framing

The concept of framing – an aspect of the social sciences discipline that deals with how groups and individuals perceive their own form of reality – was first introduced by Goffman (1974). In his book, *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*, Goffman defines a frame as a device used to “convey, interpret and evaluate information” (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992, p. 60).

Entman (1993) then enhanced the previous definition of framing, by writing, “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating text [...]” (p. 52). According to Entman, the purpose of constructing a frame is to give the public an effortless way to digest and process tangible information. Brinson & Stohl (2012) believe that frames “form the narrative structure through which newsmakers produce, organize, and explain

events or issues” (p. 271) while Gibbs and Warhover (2002) contend that framing allows journalists to “give shape and meaning to the stories they write” (p. 161). In *Getting the whole story: Reporting and writing the news*, Gibbs & Warhover outline the four distinct factors journalists consider when framing a story:

- Their understanding of their communities and what is important to the people there, which affects how widely the story will be read and whether people become engaged by the ideas or issues it presents
- Their views of what elements of the story are most significant in historical, geographical and other contexts
- Practical considerations like how long they have to write the story between the time they learn about it and who they can reach by deadline
- Their personal preferences and values with respect to reporting and writing (p. 161).

Tankard (2001) describes media framing as a way reporters can “favor a particular side without showing an explicit bias” (p. 95). Comprehending the subtle ways journalists frame their articles is important because it can expose hidden assumptions buried deep within a standard news story. According to Hackett (1984), ideology in news surpasses the notion of partiality since it provides a framework through which the press portrays events.

Media framing is different than bias because it extends beyond the concept that an article is strictly black and white or favorable or unfavorable toward a certain person, group, or organization. Framing enables researchers to code for more complex hidden meanings and emotional responses that add an additional rational regarding both a reporter and editor’s attitudes and values since they are the ones tasked with framing an event – whether portraying it in a certain light in an article or simply using specific pronouns in a headline, subtitle, or caption.

But above all else, framing reveals the differences that can ensue when news is presented to the public in differing ways. Hackett (1984) proposes that framing gives communication scholars a way to clearly examine the ideology of news while Weaver (2007) believes that, since the word “frame” is such a loose term and can be applied to nearly every type of message, textual analysis coding is one of the most popular analyzation techniques for communication researchers interested in researching media frames.

Therefore, this paper will explore the ways in which sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers frame players, coaches, and the opposition in coverage of wins and losses by conducting a textual analysis of postgame articles from both platforms. Additionally, it will determine what framing tactics are influenced by a team’s success level.

Although sportswriters are supposed to be impartial observers of a team and report on it as objectively as possible, it is unclear if these individuals – who rely on the team for player access and sources – are more or less critical in their postgame coverage than SB Nation bloggers, most of whom are fans first and information disseminators second. As a result, the following research questions will guide this study:

Research Questions

RQ1: Do sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers frame wins the same way?

RQ2: Do sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers frame losses the same way?

Chapter IV

Methodology

Design

To examine the framing of newspaper and SB Nation college football coverage, a total of 39 game recaps were analyzed using procedures associated with textual analysis, which is a “way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world” (McKee, 2003, p. 1). FBS articles were selected for the scope of this study instead of those that pertained to one of the four major professional sports leagues (MLB, NBA, NFL, or NHL) since college football fans tend to have more “diverse cultural and ethnicity backgrounds, in comparison to the general population” (Funk, Alexandris, & McDonald, 2016, p. 290).

As a way to get a sample that consisted of teams of varying levels of success, the rankings from the Associated Press’ (AP) preseason poll were compared to its final regular season poll to determine what teams originally positioned in the Top 12 did not end the 2016 season ranked and what teams that were not ranked to begin the year finished in the Top 12.

This was done instead of randomly selecting teams to ensure that those with both winning and losing records would be included in the sample. The reason a Top 12 ranking was considered the benchmark for this study is because it is approximately the upper half of the AP Poll, which ranks a total of 25 teams each week during the season.

Even though there are two other polls (the College Football Playoff rankings and the Coaches Poll), The AP Top 25 was used for this study because it is the oldest and most continuous form of rankings in college football. Additionally, it is the only poll indicative of the media’s opinion and not the viewpoints of a committee of athletic directors or coaches (“History of the AP Top 25,” 2012).

After analyzing the preseason and final regular season rankings, the University of Notre Dame, the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), the University of Colorado, and Penn State University were selected for this study based on their movement in the AP poll from August 27 to November 26.

In the preseason poll, Notre Dame – which owned a 9-3 record in 2015 – was ranked No. 10 while Ole Miss, which defeated Oklahoma State University in the previous year's Sugar Bowl, was positioned at No. 11. However, both programs suffered dismal 2016 seasons and finished with losing records. Notre Dame, for example, was not eligible to compete in a bowl game for the first time in 10 years. And, in 2016, Ole Miss had its first below .500 record in five seasons.

On the contrary, Penn State and Colorado exceeded preseason expectations, climbing from the abyss of unranked teams to finishing the regular season at No. 8 and No. 9, respectively. For Colorado, 2016 was the first season it had a winning record since concluding the 2005 campaign with a 7-6 mark. Despite the fact that Penn State has had multiple winning seasons of late and has not finished with a losing record since 2004, the program was not projected to be competitive in the Big Ten Conference in 2016, considering it finished the previous year with a 4-4 mark in league play. But it rebounded after losing two of its first four games and ended the regular season by winning eight straight.

The teams in this study represented three of the Power Five conferences – the richest leagues in college athletics – along with Notre Dame, an FBS independent. Although Notre Dame does not have a conference affiliation for football, its ties with the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) – which it is a member of for all other sports except men's hockey – means that it must play a minimum of four ACC opponents every season until the current scheduling

agreement expires in 2025. Because of this, Notre Dame can partially be viewed as an affiliate member of the ACC for football. Therefore, its inclusion meant that this study was somewhat indicative of four of the five top leagues in college football (Fortuna, 2013), with the exception of the Big IX Conference.

These teams were also qualified candidates for this study because of their past traditions of success. As of 2016, the four football programs have combined for 17 claimed national titles (Notre Dame=11, Ole Miss=3, Penn State=2, Colorado=1), 12 Heisman winners (Notre Dame=7, Ole Miss=3, Penn State=1, Colorado=1), and 267 Consensus All-Americans (Notre Dame=118, Ole Miss=81, Penn State=39, Colorado=30).

Drawing the Sample

For the purpose of this study, data collection required access to the websites of the four newspapers headquartered in the town each university is located in – *Daily Camera* (Colorado), *Centre Daily Times* (Penn State), *The Oxford Eagle* (Ole Miss), and *South Bend Tribune* (Notre Dame) – and the four SB Nation blogs dedicated to each team: The Ralpie Report (Colorado), Black Shoe Diaries (Penn State), Red Cup Rebellion (Ole Miss), and One Foot Down (Notre Dame).

While most major college football programs have multiple blogs that engage their fan bases, the platform and scope of each site can differ based on the size of its audience and the type of content being produced. But every Power Five team has an individualized SB Nation blog. Therefore, it was the blogging platform selected to maintain consistency across the board. None of the newspaper websites nor SB Nation blogs required a subscription to view content or had a paywall that prohibited access. The selection process of articles for both platforms is detailed below.

Newspaper recaps. The newspaper articles analyzed came directly from the web since the availability of the original print edition that each story appeared in was limited to geographic area. As a result, the preliminary sample was found by locating each newspaper website's search engine and inputting relevant keywords to get all coverage related to a select game.

For instance, most keywords referenced the opposing university's official title, abbreviation, or program nickname. (i.e. "Florida State," "FSU," or "Seminoles" or "University of Southern California," "USC," or "Trojans"). In one case, however, a search engine was not functioning properly and, therefore, coverage was found by scrolling through the sports section's archives.

In the initial data pull, any newspaper article (recaps, columns, features, etc.) that pertained to the first, sixth, and twelfth week of the regular season for each team was included. This totaled 122 articles (approximately 10 articles per week x 3 weeks x 4 teams). But, in an effort to narrow the sample and make the coding more manageable for a single researcher, only game recaps – and not all coverage published during the week of a game – were ultimately analyzed. To increase the sample size, though, the scope was expanded to five games (first, third, sixth, ninth, and twelfth) for each team instead of three (first, sixth, and twelfth).

Moreover, analyzing five recaps per team ensured that a somewhat accurate representation of the entire season was included in the final sample (approximately 42% of each team's regular season games). However, coverage related to bowl games was not included since not every team was eligible for the postseason. The other articles originally found that pertained to each team (columns, features, etc.) were subsequently excluded. As a result, the final sample consisted of 20 newspaper recaps (see Table 1).

Table 1

Newspaper Recaps Included in Study

Newspaper	Initial sample	Final sample
<i>Centre Daily Times</i>	31	5
<i>Daily Camera</i>	28	5
<i>South Bend Tribune</i>	33	5
<i>Oxford Eagle</i>	30	5
Total	122	20

SB Nation recaps. Since SB Nation is an online-only disseminator of sports news, the articles in the sample were also found by inputting keywords related to a specific game in each blog's search bar. Similar to the collection of newspaper recaps, the keywords used corresponded to the opposing team that each school played in a specific week.

For instance, since Notre Dame opened the season against the University of Texas, the keywords "Texas," "UT," and "Longhorns" were input into One Foot Down's search engine to get the recap that corresponded to that game. All of the SB Nation search engines returned relevant results and none of the samples had to be located by continuously scrolling through each blog's archives.

For the purpose of this study, an SB Nation recap was defined as the first article published after a game's conclusion that mentioned play-by-play, regardless if it was sprinkled with opinion or analysis. Because most SB Nation blogs typically publish 12 pieces of content per week related to a specific game, the initial data pull included over 240 articles. However,

once every piece of content that was not a recap of the first, third, sixth, ninth, or twelfth game was excluded, the final sample consisted of 19 articles.

The reason there were 19 SB Nation recaps instead of 20 was because Red Cup Rebellion did not write a traditional recap of Ole Miss' final regular season loss to rival Mississippi State University. Instead, it simply published a season summary two days later titled "Remembering Ole Miss football 2016, the season that never was." Because it was not a game recap, and since it was not published the day of the Mississippi State game, this piece of content was excluded. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 19 SB Nation recaps (see Table 2).

Table 2

SB Nation Recaps Included in Study

SB Nation blog	Initial sample	Final sample
One Foot Down	64	5
Red Cup Rebellion	60	4
Black Shoes Diaries	61	5
The Ralphie Report	57	5
Total	242	19

It is important to note, though, that not every newspaper or SB Nation recap for each team was written by the same individual. In fact, a total of 16 different writers – and one piece attributed to “staff” – were represented in the final sample. Broken down, the newspapers and SB Nation blogs each used, on average, two writers throughout the course of the season.

However, there were exceptions to this rule. Brian Howell, the Colorado beat reporter for the *Daily Camera*, and Eli Moreta-Feliz, a Penn State blogger for Black Shoe Diaries, each wrote all five of their team's recaps that were included in the final sample. On the contrary, the *Centre Daily Times* and One Foot Down each had a total of three different writers produce content that pertained to five games.

In addition, the gender of the writers mirrored industry demographics – all but one were men. The only female sportswriter/sports bloggers whose work was included in the final sample was *Centre Daily Times* journalist Jourdan Rodrigue. Yet, despite being one of the newspaper's main Penn State writers during the 2016 season, she only wrote two of the five articles that were examined. The remaining three games in the sample from the *Centre Daily Times* were covered by two male staffers, both of whom were previously alternates on the beat.

Textual Analysis

When researchers aim to study media frames in large quantities of data, they often turn to techniques associated with content analysis because it enables them to analyze articles for repetitive frames by measuring frequency of occurrence. However, instead of simply looking at words, sentences or paragraphs from a quantitative approach, the goal of this study was to determine how two different disseminators of sports news framed their game coverage. Therefore, textual analysis was the preferred method since it gives a researcher the ability to read between the lines of a text to comprehend the type of frames that often go unnoticed by the average reader.

McKee's (2003) post-structuralist approach of textual analysis emphasizes the importance of examining the whole text instead of just a portion. In this case, it meant reading every piece of content – from the headline to the very last word – to give each recap context.

Furthermore, since texts can have multiple interpretations, the intention of this process is to take into consideration the fact that a reader can comprehend or connect with a text in a way that is opposite of the producer's original intent. Thus, the overall goal is to find out what interpretations a reader is likely to make and not necessarily what interpretations he or she should make. As McKee puts it:

It isn't possible to prove that the creator's interpretation of a text is the correct, and the most important one. And it's not possible to disprove it either. ... Of course, we do know that audiences do make multiple interpretations of text. And we know that often these will disagree with the interpretations of texts. And we know that often these will disagree with the interpretation made by the creator of the text (p. 67).

This notion aligns with the purpose of the study – to develop an understanding of how sportswriters and sports bloggers frame college football teams, players, and coaches in wins and losses. In writing, there is not a single right or wrong way to frame an article or story. Instead, a content's creator has the flexibility to frame a piece in any manner he or she chooses without being bound by traditional standards. However, there is always the possibility that the audience might not read into a frame the exact way a writer originally intended.

To help researchers understand what a suitable interpretation of a text is, McKee (2003) outlines three distinct steps in his book, *Textual analysis: A beginner's guide*. The first occurs when a researcher needs to select his or her research questions sensibly based on prior research and knowledge in the field. In regard to this study, it meant building upon findings that documented the public's attitudes toward sportswriters and individualized sports blogging platforms.

Next, a researcher needs to accumulate as many relevant and comprehensive texts as they can to get the most accurate results possible. While the initial sample totaled 364 articles and though the final sample only consisted of 39, it is still a comprehensive enough pool to partially draw conclusions from because it encompasses almost half of a team's regular season recaps written during the course of a full season from both newspapers and SB Nation blogs.

The third and final step in McKee's (2003) system is establishing context for each and every text being examined since a researcher needs to be aware of what type of audience a piece was originally intended for – such as age, gender, or ethnicity. Having transparency also means that a researcher is cognizant of the time period a text was written. In regard to this study, it meant acknowledging a team's prior success, or lack thereof, in the specific week a recap was written.

Coding. To fully code these texts properly, the researcher had to set aside prior feelings or attitudes toward any of the teams so a potential bias would not taint the sample. Since textual analysis concepts were utilized, articles in the sample were evaluated using qualitative practices. Instead of counting recaps as single units and analyzing them for frequency of occurrence – a quantitative approach – each article was viewed as an individual entity and coded accordingly. After the sample was finalized, the recaps were read thoroughly and notes were taken in the margins whenever emerging themes were present.

While a traditional content analysis might have provided the steps required to thoroughly vet each article in the sample, the aim was to look at this study from a post-structuralist approach, where an entire piece is more important than just a portion. Because of this, the sample was coded using textual analysis tactics, which showed that three themes overlapped the work produced by both sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers.

Chapter V

Results

To outline the different ways newspapers frame their college football coverage compared to Sports Beat (SB) Nation blogs, which are individual online communities that create content catered to the fan perspective, 39 total game recaps from four different hometown newspapers and four SB Nation blogs that regularly covered each of the four preselected teams during the 2016 season were examined. Of those articles, 18 pertained to a hometown team's victory while 21 documented a loss (see Table 3). Although it was previously thought that sportswriters would be less critical of the hometown team in their coverage since they generally have more to lose in terms of personal relationships with sources, the results illustrate otherwise.

The results show that sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers portrayed opposing players, hometown coaches, and games that the hometown team won by a significant margin in a similar manner. However, newspapers and SB Nation blogs did not frame wins and losses the same. Newspapers tended to be more critical of the team as a whole following a loss while SB Nation blogs were overly positive at all times, ultimately strengthening the fan-first mentality. Direct passages from the recaps are used to support these findings (see Appendices A & B).

Table 3

Recaps Analyzed by Game's Outcome

Media platform	Recaps that pertained to wins	Recaps that pertained to losses	Total number of recaps
Newspaper	9	11	20
SB Nation	9	10	19
% of articles by game's outcome	46.2%	53.8%	100%

Opposing Players are not Worthy of Coverage

The most common frame was a constant reminder that opposing players are rarely portrayed in a positive manner in any form of hometown sports coverage, regardless if it is written by a sportswriter or blogger. While 74.4% ($n=29$) of the total articles in the sample did mention an opposing player's name in-text in regard to either a specific scoring drive or offensive or defensive miscue, these individuals were rarely framed for their contributions in games that their team won. Only 25.6% ($n=10$) of the 39 articles examined positively framed an opposing player for his play (see Table 4).

If sportswriters did frame an opposing player, it was always done in a subtle manner, hinting at this individual's performance on the field through the use of quotes from a hometown player or coach. Sportswriters never directly framed an opposing player in their own words in any of the newspaper recaps in the sample. SB Nation bloggers, on the other hand, were more open in their framing tactics and would occasionally praise an opposing player by connecting his name to descriptive adjectives associated with finesse, grace, and power.

For example, Joshua Vowles – One Foot Down's site manager – was direct in his framing of University of Southern California (USC) receiver and returner Adoree Jackson in his recap of Notre Dame's 45-27 loss on November 26.

Despite beginning his article by writing that Notre Dame showed minimal fight in its last game of the 2016 season, Vowles briefly switched his focus to Jackson in the third paragraph, framing him as USC's "ace," who was "incredible and used like a coach uses his best player in pee-wee football" (35, para. 3). He then blatantly wrote that Jackson's touchdowns – a reception, punt return, and kickoff return – were "incredible" and that "None of the three plays looked pedestrian" (para. 3) before returning to the loss' significance from the Notre Dame perspective.

While Jackson’s play was also portrayed positively in the *South Bend Tribune*’s recap of the same game, it was more indirect. Instead of openly praising Jackson through the use of similes and other descriptors, sportswriter Mike Vorel conveyed the same idea by using the quote, “Obviously he’s a good player — slippery, fast. He has a special niche in the return game” from Notre Dame linebacker James Onwuauu to reinforce the notion that Jackson’s performance propelled his team to victory (15, para. 7).

The other instances where an opposing player was framed positively were not as detailed or and instead just used an impactful adjective or phrase, such as “incredible,” (35, para. 3), “workhorse,” (33, para. 2), or “perfect compliment and change of pace” (31, para. 5) – to denote the effect a specific player had on a game’s outcome. In every case, though, opposing players were only portrayed in a positive manner if the hometown team lost. In coverage of games that the hometown team won, 50% ($n=9$) of the articles referenced an opposing player’s name in regard to negative play-by-play while the remaining 50% ($n=9$) did not mention an opposing player’s name once. However, it is important to note that opposing players were not directly framed in a negative manner in any of the articles examined.

Table 4

Recaps Examined that Mentioned/Framed Opposing Player

Platform (Newspaper/ SB Nation)	% of recaps that mentioned opposing player	% of recaps that included positive play- by-play of opposing player	% of recaps that included negative play- by-play of opposing player	% of recaps that positively framed opposing player	% of recaps that negatively framed opposing player
Newspaper	80%	60%	20%	25.6%	0%
SB Nation	68.4%	31.6%	36.8%	26.3%	0%

Criticism of Hometown Coaches More Prevalent than Praise

While most articles that pertained to a loss were quick to criticize the hometown head coach or defensive coordinator for their poor play-calling or decision-making, largely missing from the coverage of wins was praise or positive frames directed at these individuals for helping their team succeed. For example, of the 21 total articles that documented a loss, 61.9% ($n=13$) included a negative frame of a hometown coach while only 22.2% ($n=4$) of the 18 recaps that pertained to a win portrayed the coach in a positive manner (see Table 5).

Broken down, 70% ($n=7$) of the SB Nation articles that pertained to a loss framed a coach negatively, compared to 54.6% ($n=6$) of newspaper recaps that dealt with the same outcome. Whereas SB Nation bloggers were more likely to directly frame a coach in a negative manner without trying to hide their disdain, sportswriters often tried to do this in the most discrete way possible, making the reader infer these claims based on certain information embedded within the text.

The only exception to a newspaper not being subtle in its negative framing of a coach was in sportswriter Eric Hansen's recap of Notre Dame's season-opening loss to Texas. In his postgame coverage for the *South Bend Tribune*, Hansen directly called out Notre Dame head coach Brian Kelly and defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder in a way that is often uncharacteristic of professional sports journalists.

In his story's second paragraph, Hansen speculated that Notre Dame quarterback DeShone Kizer could have led a comeback when his team was down by three scores if Kelly would have kept his starting signal caller in the game instead of intermittently benching him whenever he made a mistake. But Hansen's harshest criticism was directed solely at VanGorder, when he wrote:

The lingering bottom line from Notre Dame's 50-47 double-overtime loss in front of the largest crowd ever to see a game in Darrell K. Royal-Texas Stadium (102,315) is that three years into Irish defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder's regime, too often it's still more about rhetoric than results (11, para. 3).

Other than the aforementioned outlier, every other instance of a sportswriter using a negative frame toward a coach was done in a subtle manner, such as noting that a head coach was winless against a rival, mentioning that his team failed to become bowl eligible for the first time in his tenure, or writing that a certain game was the worst loss under his direction.

Conversely, SB Nation writers typically criticized hometown coaches in a more straightforward manner by directly including their personal opinions of the coach in their recap or writing that a loss was the result of a coach's lack of expertise or poor judgment. Of the 10 SB Nation recaps that pertained to a loss, 57.1% ($n=4$) blatantly bashed a hometown coach for his poor play-calling while the remaining 42.9% ($n=3$) inferred, but did not directly state, that play-calling was a contributing factor in the specific loss.

One of the most poignant examples of this candor came after Notre Dame's eight-point loss to Michigan State University. In his recap, One Foot Down's Vowles wrote, "Brian Kelly was tragically wrong, while Brian VanGorder was just awful ... IT IS TIME TO SCRAP IT ALL. A firing is in order, but it won't happen" (32, para. 2-3).

Of the four total articles that pertained to wins and framed a hometown coach positively, 75% ($n=3$) were newspaper recaps. In every case, the frames were direct and made toward a hometown coach that helped his team exceed preseason expectations. Offensive coordinators and skilled position coaches were not framed and neither were opposing coaches, chiefly because their names were rarely referenced in-text, appearing in only 5.1% ($n=2$) of the 39 total articles.

Table 5

Recaps that Framed Hometown Coach

Platform (Newspaper/SB Nation)	% of losses that included negative frame of coach	% of wins that included positive frame of coach	% of recaps with no/neutral frame of coach
<i>South Bend Tribune</i>	60%	0%	40%
One Foot Down	80%	0%	20%
<i>Oxford Eagle</i>	50%	0%	50%
Red Cup Rebellion	50%	0%	50%
<i>Daily Camera</i>	0%	20%	80%
The Ralphie Report	20%	0%	80%
<i>Centre Daily Times</i>	0%	40%	60%
Black Shoe Diaries	0%	20%	80%

The Hometown Domination Frame

Whereas the hometown team was always framed as the one crushing its opponent, sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers never framed the hometown team as the one getting blown out, regardless of the score. For example, of the 18 articles that documented a win, 61.1% ($n=11$) made it apparent of the hometown team's dominating play. In comparison, only 14.3% ($n=3$) of the recaps that pertained to a loss directly framed the opponent as being the better of the two teams (see Table 6).

The hometown domination frame was present in 77.8% ($n=7$) of SB Nation recaps and 44.4% ($n=4$) of newspaper articles. Most of the time, the hometown team's superiority was indirectly made evident in a newspaper article's lede or first few paragraphs, where the

sportswriter would use strong adjectives – such as “walloped,” “crushed,” or “demolished” – to describe a game’s one-sidedness.

The exception was John McGonigal’s coverage of Penn State’s 41-14 win over the University of Iowa for the *Centre Daily Times*. In his article, McGonigal framed Penn State’s dominance in-depth by dedicating an entire paragraph to it instead of simply using one or two words to illustrate this type of superiority to the reader. As he wrote in his recap, “It was a blowout in every sense of the word, a demolition of a supposed challenge” (4, para. 11).

On the other hand, nearly every SB Nation recap examined that pertained to a win was direct in its framing of the hometown team’s dominance, similar to the tactic employed by McGonigal. For example, without trying to hide this frame, The Ralphie Report portrayed Colorado’s game against Colorado State University as an “annihilation” of its rival in a game the blog dubbed the “Rocky Mountain Horror Show” (26, para. 2) and wrote that “The final score of 44-7 was somehow closer than the game entailed” (para. 2).

Similarly, Black Shoe Diaries directly incorporated the domination frame in every article examined. In particular, it wrote that the University of Maryland was a “fraud” of a team with an “inflated ego” (23, para. 1) and that it did not take “Penn State long to assert its dominance” (para. 2) in that game. In a separate recap, the Penn State SB Nation blog wrote that the team’s September 17 game against Temple, which was decided by a touchdown, “should have been an absolute blowout” (22, para. 7).

Though the frame was present in a majority of the recaps – both from sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers – that dealt with a win by the hometown team, it became more direct and appeared on a more frequent basis when the hometown team’s margin of victory increased to a substantial level.

On the contrary, only three of the 21 total articles that pertained to a loss framed the outcome exclusively on an opponent's superiority. Of this sample, 18.2% ($n=2$) were newspaper recaps while the remaining piece was written by an SB Nation blogger. In all three instances, these frames were direct, such as an SB Nation blogger for The Ralphie Report writing that the University of Michigan showed why it was "a top-five team" (27, para. 7) or a South Bend Tribune sportswriter noting that Michigan State University "not only did it, they dominated: 260-57 yards in the rushing game, 37:57-22:03 on the clock" (12, para. 8). Every other article in the sample framed the final outcome as the hometown team's loss instead of the opposition's win.

Table 6

Recaps that Framed Hometown/Opposing Team's Superiority

Platform (Newspaper/SB Nation)	% of recaps that directly framed hometown team's superiority	% of recaps that directly framed opposing team's superiority
Newspaper	44.4%	18.2%
SB Nation	77.8%	10%
Total	61.1%	14.3%

Results Pertaining to Research Questions

RQ1: Do sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers frame wins the same way?

While the newspaper recaps included in the sample generally framed a star player's performance as the main reason why a team won – except in certain circumstances – lacking from the SB Nation articles that pertained to the same games was a consistent frame that could be used to explain who or what these bloggers attributed each victory to in their recaps.

Of the nine newspaper recaps that documented a win by the hometown team, 55.6% ($n=5$) framed an individual player as being an integral part of the victory because of either his game statistics or a momentum-changing play. The only time wins were not framed as the direct result of a star player's performance was when it marked a significant achievement for the program, such as winning a rivalry game or securing a berth in a conference championship game.

In these instances, which occurred in 33.3% ($n=3$) of newspaper articles that pertained to wins, the sportswriter focused on future implications without mentioning too much play-by-play description of the game. For instance, after Colorado began the season with a 44-7 win over rival Colorado State, Howell wrote, in his lede for the *Daily Camera*, "Yeah, it's just one game, but it's been a long time since the Colorado football team had one like this" (6, para. 2) to justify the monumental meaning behind the team's victory.

Conversely, 77.8% ($n=7$) of the SB Nation articles examined did not have a uniform attribution frame while the remaining 22.2% ($n=2$) subtly portrayed certain aspects of a team's game that contributed to the win. However, in both instances the frames were not dominant throughout. Of the SB Nation articles that pertained to a win, 88.9% ($n=8$) recounted a scoring drive, specific moment, or discussed how the game began in one of their first three paragraphs in lieu of a normal journalistic lede.

In comparison, the same newspaper recaps outlined this type of information in the middle of the story – typically the ninth or tenth paragraph. The lone SB Nation recap that had somewhat of an attribution frame equally portrayed the teams' offensive and defensive performances as leading to the win. But despite this outlier, every other SB Nation recap that documented a win was more of a play-by-play account of each game than traditional postgame coverage with an attribution frame and insight from those directly involved.

RQ2: Do sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers frame losses differently?

Although newspapers typically attributed wins to the performance of a star player, missing from their coverage of losses was a similar, individualized frame that identified who was responsible. Instead, as an alternative to singling out one individual player in particular, the outcome of these games was often portrayed as the result of poor play on the field from the offense, defense, or team as a whole.

This frame was fully evident in 63.6% ($n=7$) of the 11 newspaper recaps that documented a loss. In comparison, the remaining 36.4% ($n=4$) had the aforementioned frame plus another that pinpointed the loss – either the combination of poor play coupled with an opponent’s superiority or insufficient performance on both sides of the ball.

The corresponding SB Nation recaps, on the other hand, mainly attributed each loss to a combination of poor play by the hometown team mixed with the opposition’s all-around production play in that individual game. This study found that this particular frame was present in 70% ($n=7$) of the 10 SB Nation articles related to a loss. Despite the fact that there were 11 losses included in the original sample of newspaper articles, Red Cup Rebellion did not publish a recap of Ole Miss’ final game, a 55-20 loss to Mississippi State. Thus, only 10 pieces of content was analyzed for this sample.

The exception to this was Vowles recap of Notre Dame’s loss to Michigan State for One Foot Down. Unlike Hansen’s recap of this game for the *South Bend Tribune*, which did not follow the common frame outlined for newspaper articles pertaining to wins because it framed Michigan State in a positive manner, Vowles’ recap placed all of the blame on Notre Dame as a whole, writing, “this team has MASSIVE problems” (32, para. 7), without even partially applauding Michigan State’s play that resulted in the upset.

Chapter VI

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine partiality of hometown newspapers and Sports Beat Nation blogs based on the ways in which each platform framed its college football coverage. More specifically, it used techniques associated with textual analysis to determine how professional sportswriters portrayed the hometown team, its players, coaches, and the opposition in coverage of wins and losses compared to bloggers who created content from a fan perspective.

Key findings. Newspapers were generally more positive in their postgame articles following a win, attributing a game's outcome to the performance of a star offensive player, but tended to be critical of the hometown team's offense, defense, and/or special teams after a loss.

Conversely, SB Nation recaps of wins lacked a standard attribution frame and instead jumped directly into a chronological description of the game. By the way these articles were written and their overall tone, it was almost as if the bloggers expected a win from the get-go and tailored their articles to reflect this sense of predictability.

One of the most noticeable examples of this lack of a standardized frame occurred in the first paragraph of Black Shoe Diaries' recap of Penn State's 24-point win over the University of Maryland on October 8, which described the game's first drive in the ensuing paragraph. As Moreta-Feliz wrote, "It didn't take long for Penn State to assert its dominance. Maryland won the toss and elected to defer, and the Nittany Lions drove down and scored a touchdown in what seemed like the easiest drive of the season" (23, para. 2).

Though the SB Nation coverage of wins was overly positive of the hometown team and almost always portrayed the opposition negatively, the recaps that pertained to losses tended to be somewhat critical of the hometown team's play while also partially framing the game's

outcome on the opposition's play. Thus, the blow directed at the hometown team was cushioned in a way and did not come off as severe.

On the other hand, the only time a sportswriter did not frame a game's outcome to the performance of the hometown team's star player was when the win marked a significant milestone for the program, such as defeating a rival for the first time in years or capturing a division or conference title.

These instances did not attribute the win to a specific play or player and instead focused on what it meant from the perspective of players and coaches to accomplish this feat. Typically, the entire article was used to discuss future implications while the sportswriter minimally mentioned what happened during the game.

McGonigal took this approach in the final Penn State regular season recap for the *Centre Daily Times*, detailing the midfield celebration that ensued after the team knocked off Michigan State to win the Big Ten's East Division crown from the perspective of the head coach, athletic director, and university president. His story rarely mentioned specific play-by-play accounts and instead was written more like a feature that fixated on the emotional appeal of the victory by writing:

Penn State president Eric Barron and his wife, Molly, in the heap of chaos on the Beaver Stadium field, walked hand-in-hand smiling.

They stopped around midfield and watched from afar as James Franklin wrapped up his postgame ESPN interview, and as the scrum started to open, the two joined in the celebration.

The Barrons, Franklin and athletic director Sandy Barbour gathered together, taking a brief moment to enjoy what they all just saw unfold before their eyes.

The scene surrounding them was electric, the mood a mix between ecstasy and affirmation (5, para. 1-4).

This finding is relevant because it strengthens the notion that sports extend beyond statistics and plays and hold greater meaning for those directly involved and those with a vested interest in a team. Readers can find out who won or lost a game instantaneously by scrolling through their social media feed or visiting one of the countless online sports sites. But it takes the skills of a sportswriter to immerse the audience in the scene and give them a poignant insider's perspective into the events that transpired after a team claimed a monumental victory.

While the results show that SB Nation bloggers as a whole were less critical of the entire team than sportswriters, they typically framed the hometown head coach or defensive coordinator in a negative light on a more frequent basis. Sportswriters also occasionally portrayed the hometown head coach negatively but, in every instance except one, this scrutiny was done in a subtle manner. Based on the phrasing of the text in these cases, the reader could easily infer that the head coach was being framed negatively. However, most sportswriters were never directly critical.

In addition, this study examined the ways in which sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers framed opposing players in wins and losses. Though a majority of the articles in the sample openly mentioned the name of an opposing player, this was only done when it referenced him in regard to positive or negative play-by-play, such as the opposing quarterback throwing a touchdown to put his team ahead or the running back fumbling at the end of the game to secure a win for the hometown team. Other than mentioning their names, very few recaps framed opposing players for their performance on the field.

However, if an opposing player singlehandedly propelled his team to victory over the hometown team, sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers would typically acknowledge this and frame him positively. SB Nation bloggers were direct in this framing and would connect the opposing player's name to descriptive and strong adjectives.

Sportswriters, though, were once again subtle in this type of framing. Instead of directly applauding the performance, they would embed quotes from a hometown player or coach that openly praised the opposing player. Similar to how hometown players were never criticized in coverage of a loss, opposing players were never framed negatively by sportswriters or SB Nation bloggers, regardless of a game's outcome.

This could be because these individuals are student-athletes and not paid professionals. However, hometown coaches of losing teams typically were not afforded this luxury. Since most are signed to long-term, multimillion-dollar contracts, sportswriters and bloggers may perceive these individuals as easy targets to criticize.

When the hometown team won by a large margin – typically three or more touchdowns – both sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers would frame the game as a total blowout. But when the script was flipped and the hometown team lost by as many points, it would simply be portrayed as just another loss.

Sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers were direct with this frame and would sometimes write that the final score was closer than the game entailed when the hometown team won. On the contrary, while newspapers would frame losses on the offense, defense, or special teams and SB Nation blogs would portray it as a combination of poor play plus the opponent's performance, neither attributed a loss exclusively to the opposing team's all-around dominance nor superiority.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study is not without limitations, though, including the possibility that other college-town newspapers and Sports Beat Nation blogs do not follow these outlined themes when framing their content and instead portray wins, losses, opposing players, and hometown coaches in a different manner. Because of this, it is difficult to generalize the findings of this study and apply them to every sportswriter or SB Nation blogger covering an FBS team.

Even though teams from three of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Power Five conferences, plus Notre Dame, were represented in this study, there were still teams from seven additional conferences that were not examined. If this study would have looked at the media that covered other leagues whose schools are located in smaller markets, such as the Sun Belt or Mid-American Conference, then it could have been determined if newspapers with less reach framed their recaps in a similar manner to those in the sample or if they took a completely different approach.

The only hindrance to this suggestion, however, is that nearly all of the FBS teams not affiliated with a Power Five conference do not have their own SB Nation blog. Instead, these teams share a general blog with every other FBS school affiliated with its conference. As a result, there would be no guarantee that the site would post recaps of every team it covers. Thus, it would be difficult to acquire enough relevant articles for a complete sample.

Moreover, the sample size of 39 total articles between the two different media platforms is relatively small considering the amount of coverage sportswriters and SB Nation bloggers produce for each team throughout the course of a season. As a result, the scope of this study could have been expanded to examine coverage from every game each team played during the 2016 season and not just its first, third, sixth, ninth, and twelfth game.

In addition, more than one newspaper and sports blog that regularly covered each of the preselected teams could have been examined since nearly every major college football team has multiple outlets that report on it, both niche and mainstream. Looking at an additional two or three newspapers and blogs from each team, for example, would have given a broader range of results that could, in theory, have been used to make the findings more comprehensive.

To further this study, all coverage a newspaper and SB Nation blog publishes in the week leading up to a game could be examined to determine what additional themes emerge from editorials, feature stories, and analytical pieces. Also, instead of just studying the most recent college football season, it would be interesting to broaden the scope to encompass a few seasons to determine if these previously outlined frames appear in past coverage from both platforms.

However, the results from this textual analysis could serve as a valuable starting point when considering the different factors that influence the ways in which sportswriters and bloggers portray the hometown team, its players, coach, and the opposition in coverage of wins and losses. Since objectivity among sportswriters and bloggers will most likely continue to be a relevant issue, this study can serve as a springboard into further research on this particular topic, which could include either a further expanded textual analysis, content analysis, or personal interviews with the sportswriters and bloggers whose work was examined.

Conclusions

Although it was previously thought that fan bloggers would be more critical than the mainstream media because they have nothing to lose in terms of access or sources, this was not necessarily the case. If anything, SB Nation bloggers were usually more positive in their coverage and would always try to find constructive takeaways in a loss with the type of optimism

that only a fan could possess. This could stem from the fact that these bloggers were, and still are, fans of the team they write about.

Therefore, they probably maintain that fan-first mentality and try to stay as positive as possible because the team resonates within their own identity and helps them have a heightened view of self. The only aspect that they were truly critical of was when a head coach or defensive coordinator was underperforming. However, this scrutiny is understandable because fans tend to openly show disdain toward a head coach when the team is going through a losing drought, most likely because they do not want to be critical of those they idolize – the athletes.

These results further indicate that a media outlet's target audience somewhat influences its overall level of partiality. For instance, the newspapers examined serve a broad audience composed of its region's local population, which includes both sports fans and those who have no vested interest in the success or failures of the hometown team. This is probably why the tone and framing of the newspaper articles was affected by each team's on-the-field success.

Alternatively, because SB Nation blogs cater to a niche group of readers, they have to actively tailor their coverage to fit the fan agenda. In regard to the SB Nation recaps examined, it meant reinforcing positivity whenever applicable to ensure continued readership.

Furhtermore, the results illustrate that evidence of BIRGing and CORFing was found in some SB Nation recaps through the use of subjective pronouns such as “we,” “us,” and “them.” When the hometown team was winning and exceeding preseason expectations, a writer would sometimes use this phrasing to connect themselves to the team. But BIRGing did not occur with as much frequency as originally thought.

Only 33.3% ($n=3$) of the nine SB Nation recaps that pertained to a win included a subjective pronoun aimed at indulging a writer in the team's success. Because SB Nation

bloggers are usually die-hard fans, though, they did not directly CORF by trying to distance themselves and the collective fan base following losses – other than referring to the team by the school’s official name in-text instead of using the subjective “we.”

On the other hand, although it is often not outwardly evident, sportswriters – in general – often BIRG when the team on their beat is doing well. However, this study did not look at indirect BIRGing from that viewpoint. Since sportswriters always write game coverage from a third-person perspective and do not use the pronouns “we” or “them,” the BIRGing tendencies of these individuals were not coded.

In a way, the stylistic and structural differences between newspaper and SB Nation recaps affected the way coverage was framed. All of the newspaper recaps examined were written in the same standard newswriting format and had a lede, body paragraphs, quotes, and a conclusion. However, SB Nation articles were all structured differently.

Some of the SB Nation recaps were written in the inverted pyramid style and a few wrapped up the piece by discussing the following week’s opponent, similar to the way sportswriters close their recaps. But even fewer SB Nation bloggers included quotes in their coverage. As a result, this lack of an apparent structure and flow in SB Nation articles can most likely be pinpointed to the fact that there is not a universal guide that details the required components a blog post must have.

Even though the SB Nation brand is owned by Vox Media, a digital news company that runs eight separate editorial websites, the content posted on each blog is, in a way, as unique as the individuals who write them. If, for instance, a writer wants to simply post a recap filled with nothing but analysis and game statistics, then he or she has the freedom to do so.

Or, if the hometown team lost by a large margin and the site does not want to post an immediate game recap because the fan base is disgusted or in shock, it does not have to and can instead just skip that game. Sportswriters who work on a tight deadline, though, do not have this convenience. No matter what, they are expected to file their game story on time so it can be posted on the outlet's website in a timely manner and appear in the following day's print edition.

Lastly, there were not any instances of sportswriters directly cheerleading the team on their beat to victory through their writing regardless of the team's success. Although they were overly positive of the hometown team in their coverage of wins and games that the hometown team blew out its opponent, sportswriters tended to be objective when covering losses by subtly weaving hometown scrutiny into their piece without interjecting opinion or speculation.

Therefore, results from this textual analysis show that sportswriters try to distance themselves from the "toy department" moniker that has constantly plagued the profession by being critical – yet fair – in their coverage of college football teams while actively differentiating their work from that of fan bloggers.

Appendix A
Newspaper Recaps Examined

ID #	Date	Source	Writer
1	9/3/16	Centre Daily Times	Ryne Gery
		Nittany Lion defense cooks up turnovers to help stop Kent State	
		http://www.centredaily.com/sports/college/penn-state-university/psu-football/article99906162.html	
2	9/17/16	Centre Daily Times	Jourdan Rodrigue
		Injury-riddled Penn State edges Temple in series finale	
		http://www.centredaily.com/sports/college/penn-state-university/psu-football/article102482857.html	
3	10/8/16	Centre Daily Times	Jourdan Rodrigue
		Penn State wallops Maryland behind McSorley, Barkley tandem	
		http://www.centredaily.com/sports/college/penn-state-university/psu-football/article106955432.html	
4	11/5/16	Centre Daily Times	John McGonigal
		Penn State easily defeats Iowa	
		http://www.centredaily.com/sports/college/penn-state-university/psu-football/article112871868.html	
5	11/26/16	Centre Daily Times	John McGonigal
		Penn State takes down Michigan State	
		http://www.centredaily.com/sports/college/penn-state-university/psu-football/article117292018.html	

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|----|----------|---|--------------|
| 6 | 9/2/16 | Daily Camera | Brian Howell |
| | | CU Buffs' complete effort leads to dominating win over CSU Rams | |
| | | http://www.dailycamera.com/ci_30323279/cu-buffs-roll-past-csu-rocky-mountain-showdown | |
| 7 | 9/17/16 | Daily Camera | Brian Howell |
| | | Sefo Liufau's injury dooms CU Buffs in loss to No. 4 Michigan | |
| | | http://www.dailycamera.com/news/boulder/ci_30374518/cu-buffs-upset-bid-falls-short-against-no | |
| 8 | 10/8/16 | Daily Camera | Brian Howell |
| | | After close loss to USC, No. 21 CU Buffs still a work in progress | |
| | | http://www.dailycamera.com/sports/ci_30449139/no-21-cu-buffs-drop-close-one-usc | |
| 9 | 11/3/16 | Daily Camera | Brian Howell |
| | | Isaiah Oliver rescues CU Buffs in win over UCLA | |
| | | http://www.dailycamera.com/news/boulder/ci_30537657/no-21-cu-buffs-get-ugly-win-over | |
| 10 | 11/26/16 | Daily Camera | Brian Howell |
| | | CU Buffs advance to Pac-12 title game with win over Utah | |
| | | http://www.dailycamera.com/news/ci_30607477/cu-buffs-advance-pac-12-title-game-win | |
| 11 | 9/5/16 | South Bend Tribune | Eric Hansen |
| | | Game story: Notre Dame defenseless in 50-47 overtime loss to Texas | |
| | | http://www.ndinsider.com/football/game-story-notre-dame-defenseless-in---overtime-loss/article_29228d30-7323-11e6-82a4-43f1d52713d2.html | |

- 12 9/18/16 South Bend Tribune Eric Hansen
 Game story: Notre Dame defense bashed in ground game in loss to Michigan State
http://www.ndinsider.com/football/game-story-notre-dame-defense-bashed-in-ground-game-in/article_a8c5ab1a-7d57-11e6-872e-c3106a6e8d15.html
- 13 10/8/16 South Bend Tribune Mike Vorel
 Game story: Miserable day ends in miserable way for Notre Dame
http://www.ndinsider.com/football/game-story-miserable-day-ends-in-miserable-way-for-notre/article_ba5002fe-8da6-11e6-a9b4-279069f17e77.html
- 14 11/5/16 South Bend Tribune Mike Vorel
 Game story: Navy offense has its way in upset of Notre Dame
http://www.ndinsider.com/football/game-story-navy-offense-has-its-way-in-upset-of/article_b455f05e-a3a2-11e6-a3f0-eb75563194df.html
- 15 11/26/16 South Bend Tribune Mike Vorel
 Game story: Special teams gaffes punctuate USC romp over Notre Dame
http://www.ndinsider.com/football/game-story-special-teams-gaffes-punctuate-usc-romp-over-notre/article_45028bae-b450-11e6-87c6-efda7247ecb.html
- 16 9/6/16 Oxford Eagle Jake Thompson
 Second-half collapse dooms Ole Miss in opener
<http://www.oxfordeagle.com/2016/09/06/second-half-collapse-dooms-ole-miss-in-opener/>
- 17 9/17/16 Oxford Eagle Davis Potter
 Ole Miss loses another lead, falls to Alabama
<http://m.oxfordeagle.com/2016/09/17/ole-miss-loses-another-lead-falls-to-alabama/>

18 10/18/16 Oxford Eagle Davis Potter
Ole Miss can't solve Arkansas riddle
<http://www.oxfordeagle.com/2016/10/16/ole-miss-cant-solve-arkansas-riddle/>

19 11/5/16 Oxford Eagle Davis Potter
Ole Miss quarterback Chad Kelly injures knee in Georgia
Southern win
<http://www.oxfordeagle.com/2016/11/05/chad-kelly-goes-down-with-knee-injury-in-ole-miss-win/>

20 11/26/16 Oxford Eagle Davis Potter
Ole Miss' season ends with blowout loss in Egg Bowl
<http://m.oxfordeagle.com/2016/11/26/ole-miss-season-ends-with-blowout-loss-in-egg-bowl/>

Appendix B
SB Nation Recaps Examined

ID #	Date	Source	Writer
21	9/3/16	Black Shoe Diaries	Eli Moreta-Feliz
		Offense Anew: Penn State Defeats Kent State 33-13	
		http://www.blackshoediaries.com/2016/9/3/12786402/penn-state-football-offense-looks-promising-kent-state-trace-mcsorley-joe-moorhead	
22	9/17/16	Black Shoe Diaries	Eli Moreta-Feliz
		Revenge Is Just Too Sweet: Penn State 34, Temple 27	
		http://www.blackshoediaries.com/2016/9/17/12952628/penn-state-nittany-lions-take-revenge-beat-temple-34-to-27-james-franklin-matt-rhule	
23	10/8/16	Black Shoe Diaries	Eli Moreta-Feliz
		Penn State Puts Overmatched Maryland In Its Place, Wins 38-14	
		http://www.blackshoediaries.com/2016/10/8/13211104/penn-state-football-maryland-terrapins-remember-the-score-franklin-durkin-barkley-mcsorley	
24	11/5/16	Black Shoe Diaries	Eli Moreta-Feliz
		Never A Doubt: Penn State Flips Iowa, 41-14	
		http://www.blackshoediaries.com/2016/11/5/13536670/penn-state-football-defeats-iowa-hawkeyes-saquon-barkley-james-franklin-trace-mcsorley-kirk-ferentz	
25	11/26/16	Black Shoe Diaries	Eli Moreta-Feliz
		Statement: Penn State 45, Michigan State 12	
		http://www.blackshoediaries.com/2016/11/26/13753646/penn-state-football-michigan-state-spartans-big-ten-east-champions-james-franklin-trace-mcsorley	

- 26 9/2/16 The Ralphie Report Sam Metivier
Rocky Mountain Horror Show: Colorado blows out Colorado State
<http://www.ralphiereport.com/colorado-buffaloes-football/2016/9/2/12779950/rocky-mountain-horror-show-colorado-blows-out-colorado-state>
- 27 9/17/16 The Ralphie Report Jeff Hauser
Buffaloes push but can't break through, fall to Michigan 45-28
<http://www.ralphiereport.com/2016/9/17/12954438/buffaloes-push-but-cant-break-through-fall-to-michigan-48-28>
- 28 10/8/16 The Ralphie Report Jeff Hauser
Colorado can't overcome slow first half, fall to USC
<http://www.ralphiereport.com/colorado-buffaloes-football/2016/10/8/13213682/colorado-buffaloes-usc-trojans-recap>
- 29 11/3/16 The Ralphie Report Sam Metivier
Colorado beats UCLA in rock fight, 20-10
http://www.ralphiereport.com/colorado-buffaloes-football/2016/11/3/13517352/colorado-beats-ucla-in-rock-fight-20-10?_ga=2.21200190.446732403.1496690656-1857049377.1490028407
- 30 11/26/16 The Ralphie Report Jeff Hauser
We own the South: Colorado Buffaloes clinch the division
<http://www.ralphiereport.com/2016/11/26/13754612/south-colorado-buffaloes-clinch-the-division>
- 31 9/5/16 One Foot Down One Foot Down Staff
Notre Dame Falls To Texas 50-47 In 2OT Thriller
<http://www.onefootdown.com/2016/9/5/12797420/notre-dame-falls-to-texas-50-47-in-2ot-thriller>

- 32 9/18/16 One Foot Down Joshua Vowles
Rapid Reaction: Notre Dame 28, Michigan State 36
<http://www.onefootdown.com/2016/9/18/12956672/rapid-reaction-notre-dame-28-michigan-state-36>
- 33 10/8/16 One Foot Down Bobby Norell
NC State Defeats Notre Dame 10-3
<http://www.onefootdown.com/2016/10/8/13212750/nc-state-defeats-notre-dame-10-3>
- 34 11/5/16 One Foot Down Brad Wechter
Notre Dame Falls to Navy, 28-27
<http://www.onefootdown.com/2016/11/5/13535170/notre-dame-falls-to-navy-28-27>
- 35 11/26/16 One Foot Down Joshua Vowles
Notre Dame Loses The Fight Against USC 45-27
http://www.onefootdown.com/2016/11/26/13754280/notre-dame-loses-the-fight-against-usc-45-27-fighting-irish-trojans-2016?_ga=2.7122615.446732403.1496690656-1857049377.1490028407
- 36 9/6/16 Red Cup Rebellion Jeff Gray
Ole Miss vs. Florida State: Rebels blow a 22-point lead in Orlando
<http://www.redcuprebellion.com/2016/9/6/12806348/florida-state-ole-miss-comeback-recap-final-score>
- 37 9/17/16 Red Cup Rebellion Jeff Gray
Alabama vs. Ole Miss 2016: Rebels blow another huge lead
<http://www.redcuprebellion.com/2016/9/17/12953922/ole-miss-alabama-2016-recap-final-score-stats>

38 10/18/16 Red Cup Rebellion Will Gates

Ole Miss' offensive collapse against Arkansas started with early-down failures

<http://www.redcuprebellion.com/2016/10/18/13311662/ole-miss-arkansas-2016-offense-advanced-stats-recap-hugh-freeze-chad-kelly>

39 11/5/16 Red Cup Rebellion Jeff Gray

Ole Miss beat Georgia State but lost Chad Kelly

<http://www.redcuprebellion.com/2016/11/5/13535398/ole-miss-georgia-southern-final-score-chad-kelly-injury-jason-pellerin>

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