Publishing for Paydirt:

Analyzing How Messages About Big-Time College Football Reinforce Power

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This dissertation titled

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ABSTRACT

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Publishing for Paydirt: Analyzing How Messages About Big-Time College Football Reinforce Power

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College athletic departments are expanding a trend of hiring professional journalists to improve their content and grow their audiences. This positioning of the professional journalist in the arena he used to cover creates unique dynamics for the professional journalist, for the department, and for the audience. This dissertation adds to the literature by identifying the dynamics, roles, and routines of an athletic department communication worker at a major athletic conference university. It examines how those dynamics, roles, and routines influence content for the department’s website and how this content upholds the athletic department’s position of political and economic power in its geographical region and sustains the cultural hegemony of college football. I employed a month-long observation prior to and at the start of the 2012 University of Washington Huskies football season. A mixed-methods approach generated ample empirical data as collection procedures included participant observation, unstructured interviews, and document review. The results of this dissertation find the athletic department communication worker negotiating three roles: The roles of “Traditional Journalist,” of “PR Practitioner,” and of “Subordinate.” This structure ultimately is utilized to exploit college football players, to place material interests ahead of human interests, and to maintain and strengthen the cultural hegemony of big-time college football.
To Blair & Quinn Haines,

May you always be one step ahead of the game
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INTRODUCTION: CHARGING OUT OF THE TUNNEL

“Sports have a vice-like grip on the emotions of the American people. ... The sportsworld more than any other phenomenon dominates the consciousness and everyday lives of millions of Americans.”

Sport is powerful. We know this because we see sport’s influence and its reach all around us. We know this because we recognize the pervasiveness of the ever-present sports media, because we witness stadiums and arenas across the country filled with people, and because we identify “the cultural artifacts of everyday life that draw their inspiration from sports” (Jhally, 1984, p. 41). In Seattle, Washington – as around the industrialized world – sport is powerful. In Seattle, the sport that is king is University of Washington (UW) Huskies football. We can see the power and influence in UW football in the resources provided it. For example, the state’s highest paid individual public employee – by $1.3 million – is Huskies football coach Steve Sarkisian, who in 2011 earned $2,529,168 (“Washington State Salary Database,” 2012). Six Saturdays a year, the Huskies football team attracts about 72,000 fans to its scenic stadium standing sentry along the western shore of Lake Washington.

We can see it in the resources it generates. According to a U.S. Department of Education report, UW’s football team generated the most revenue of any Pacific-10 Conference team from July 1, 2009 to June 30, 2010 by bringing in $33,919,639 (Dosh, 2011). The Pacific-10 Conference consisted of the athletic programs of 10 west coast universities stretching from Washington to Arizona. In 2011, the conference expanded to 12 teams when it added the University of Utah and Colorado University. Upon expansion, the newly minted “Pac-12” signed a 12-year media rights agreement with
ESPN and Fox for $4.3 billion, which will generate about $21 million per school per year (Berkowitz, 2012). Also in 2011, the UW’s Board of Trustees approved a $250 million financing plan – $50 million of which would be from private donations – to renovate Husky Stadium. Construction began November 2011. According to the *Seattle Times*, $48.5 million had been raised by April 2012 (Condotta, 2012).

We also understand how powerful sport is in the loyal rhetoric spewed on radio airwaves and television, on the Internet, and in print. With little regard to the type and/or ownership of the media outlet, the message is one of loyalty, a point made by John Nauright as he describes how the power of sport is embedded in the media’s language:

… the trends in elite professional or achievement sports point to an increasing centralization of resources, while a rhetoric of purity, fair play and expanding opportunities abound . . . [the] role of sport [has shifted] from diversion to consumption, to spectacle and beyond, where sports events and teams have become vehicles to promote strategies of growth, investment, capital accumulation, global and regional positioning for further capital accumulation, local, regional and national political success and as sites for the solidification and regeneration of national or regional identity (Nauright in Nauright & Schimmel, 2005, pp. 208-209).

In 1972, Paul Hoch published “Rip Off The Big Game: The Exploitation of Sports by the Power Elite.” Hoch, playing off the words of Karl Marx (in Elster, 1986), suggested that sports – not religion – serves as America’s opiate of choice. The bureaucratic control of the spectacle of sport, which Hoch details in his book, did not evolve by accident (1972). He offered that the Americans of the early 1970s spent more time, energy, and intellect on the “Big Game,” as opposed to the pressing civil issues of the day like the Vietnam War, escalating military deficits, student protests and racial inequalities. While watching a football game, Hoch wrote, “[an American] can be both drugged out of taking any action that might upset the present *status quo*, and also
drugged in a most efficient way into accepting the values and world view of the present
status quo” (Hoch, p. 22). However, Hoch’s analysis does not describe how sport has
situated itself to maintain its own role within the power elite, nor does it analyze how the
power elite goes about ensuring that the opiate is working on the masses. At the time he
wrote the book, it is likely Hoch could, in fact, have imagined America’s ever-increasing
dependence on sports. However, even he likely would not have predicted that that
dependency has intensified to the point it has blurred society’s sightlines so completely
that it had difficulty seeing the most vile of crimes, ranging from serial child rape in the
football locker room at Pennsylvania State University revealed in 2011 to a 2003 murder
cover-up in the men’s basketball coaches office at Baylor University. Nauright reaches
farther than Hoch given that his writing took place more than 30 years later, but even his
analysis does not describe how organizers of sporting events and team administrators
position themselves to achieve more capital accumulation and to keep their audiences
hooked on the opiate.

This dissertation attempts to do that as it looks through the lens of a big-time
college football program. In the following pages, this study will describe how the
communications tools and operations at one university – the University of Washington –
are used to maintain the football program’s place among the power elite. It will reveal
how the university athletic department has structured its own media worker routines to
concentrate the control of the production of the spectacle and secure authority, and thus
uphold its own positions of economic and political power as it maneuvers to achieve
more capital accumulation. In Seattle, it is hard to get away from UW Huskies football,
as Nauright (2005) suggested sport is the case on a global scale. Just as the power of
sport at many levels has played out across the capitalized globe, UW football, too, has become a “vehicle of social control which both exploited workers and expanded the hold of capital on all areas of human activity” in the Seattle region (Boyle & Haynes, 2009, p. 4). This Marxist interpretation is vetted in the following pages.

College athletic departments are expanding a trend of hiring professional journalists to improve the content of their websites and to grow their audiences in order to secure this accumulation of wealth. The positioning of the professional journalist in the arena he used to cover creates unique dynamics for the professional journalist, for the athletics department, and for the audience. Transparent and balanced in his former profession, the journalist now writes PR materials with an obvious bias toward the power structure. This dissertation adds to the literature by identifying the dynamics, roles, and routines of an athletic department communication worker at a major athletic conference university. It examines how those dynamics, roles, and routines influence content for the department’s promotional and informational website and how this content upholds the athletic department’s position of political and economic power in its geographical region. I employed a month-long observation prior to and at the start of the 2012 University of Washington Huskies football season. A mixed-methods approach generated empirical data as collection procedures included participant observation, unstructured interviews, and document review. The results of this dissertation find the athletic department communication worker negotiating three roles: The roles of “Traditional Journalist,” of “PR Practitioner,” and of “Subordinate.” These roles and the routines within them produce barriers to achieving the aims of traditional journalism and PR effectiveness. However, it is the role of subordinate that further increases the scope
of the athletic department’s political and economic power. This dissertation contends that the structure and routines of this specific communications worker put the football program in a favorable position to achieve more capital accumulation and to keep their audiences hooked on the opiate in order to enhance the football program’s political and economic power, an idea that encompasses all six of the chapters found herein.

Chapter One will describe the theoretical and conceptual bases of this study, which include an examination of the political economy, Marxist capitalism and expansions of Marxist critiques, public relations, and the Sports/Media Complex. It then surveys the college football and communications landscape, and describes this specific landscape of the University of Washington. Next, this chapter describes the methods used to collect empirical data, provides an overview of the findings, and describes my own reflexivity and ethical considerations in this research.

Chapter Two introduces readers to the University of Washington and its athletics department’s political and economic positioning in Seattle. It further introduces readers to the Athletics Communication personnel at UW, as well as the hierarchical and bureaucratic structures employed within the athletic department. The content of GoHuskies.com is examined in Chapter Three and focuses on the types of stories produced, as well as the specific content published. Chapter Four explores the roles and routines of one specific media worker: Gregg Bell, a former professional journalist, who serves as the UW athletic department’s Director of Writing. Through the observation, analysis, and interviews, I have placed Bell’s roles into three separate categories – Traditional Journalist, PR Practitioner, and Subordinate – and provide examples of his daily actions and production that fall into each of those categories. In Chapter Five, I
detail the ills of modern day college football and its power structure. This chapter also expands upon the findings by describing who the winners and losers are in this capitalist endeavor and how they fit into college football’s national power structure and the modern reality the cultural hegemony big-time college football has created.

In conclusion, barriers to change and opportunities for more research on the topics explored herein are identified and presented. Recommendations to journalism educations, journalists, and PR practitioners are also offered.

As lines between journalism and public relations continue blur with the advent of new technologies and it is left for media consumers to distinguish between the two forms of communication, and the effects of the opiate of sport-inspired fervor take hold, sport media consumers must be able to decipher and understand the messages with which they are inundated. Sport is powerful – and power can corrupt. This research is important because the link between sport and corruption is obvious; sports media consumers must have the ability to understand it, or forever be duped.
CHAPTER 1: THE GAME PLAN

“According to newspaper research, 85 percent of American males open to the sports page first. According to the University of Oregon, about 70 percent of its media mentions were sports-related. The remainder were alumni and faculty obituaries.”
– Mark Yost, 2010, p. 28.

In his book *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan suggests that the product of the mass media – whether it is news, opinion, or entertainment – is basically an endorsement for the media owners’ and advertisers’ capitalistic, consumptionist pursuits (Hoch, 1972; McLuhan, 1965). Hoch explained how this notion is prevalent in sports journalism. He cited one example from the 1930s when heavyweight boxing champion Gene Tunney claimed that he paid 5% of his fight purses to scribes for publicity (p. 137), and another from a more recent quote from former National Football League commissioner Pete Rozelle, who in the 1960s said, “Whatever success the NFL has had is due, in no small measure, to the wholehearted support it has received through the years from newspapermen, radio announcers and commentators, and more recently, television announcers and commentators” (p. 139). The growth of commercialized sport is congruent with the growth of media coverage of sport (Boyle & Haynes, 2009). Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in the insatiable demand Americans have for college football and the coverage of it. To understand this relationship, one must understand the shadow of the political economy that is cast over sports and sports media. In this chapter, I describe the theoretical and conceptual bases of this study from the political economy to Marxist capitalism and expansions of Marxist critiques. These ideas extend into brief examinations of public relations and the modern Sports/Media Complex.
The Political Economy & Marxism

A concept that dates back to 1615, “political economy” describes a “science of wealth acquisition common to the State as well as the Family” (Hoogvelt, 1997, p. 3). Using the concept to interpret society was not fully introduced until the late 1700s when Scottish philosopher Adam Smith published several books that attempted to explain societal changes at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (Williams, 2003). Promoting the ideals of capitalism – though the word had yet to be used in the feudal society, Smith introduced virtues of the free market. An “invisible hand” guides the forces of the market and works for the good of society. However, Marx was not so sure. Rather, he contended that political economy “starts with the fact of private property … the only wheels which political economy sets into motion are greed and the war amongst the greedy – competition” (Marx in Elster, 1986, p. 36). Marx also concluded that the bourgeoisie, or capitalist class, has to exploit the sacrifice of the working class, or proletariat, to fully express its greed, to maximize profit, and to maintain its position and influence (Williams, 2003; Marx, 1903). Marx wrote of the social dynamic that describes this:

Production, distribution, exchange, and consumption thus form a perfect connection . . . To be sure this is a connection, but it does not go very deep. Production is determined according to the economists by universal natural laws, while distribution depends on social chance . . . and the final of act of consumption, which is considered not only as a final purpose but also as a final aim, falls properly outside the scope of economics (1903, pp. 8-9).

Marx turned the focus from the good of the market to the social relation of the exploitation of the worker and the society that evolves from such exploitation. This social connection is expressed in exchange value. In Capital, Marx defines commodity
as “a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another,” and wealth, he writes, is the accumulation of commodities (Marx in Sayer, 1989, p. 50). He explains use-values, exchange-values, and how the value of commodities can manifest itself (Marx in Sayer, 1989). Riches, Marx claims, are use-values. Not so with exchange-values: “Exchanges are exchanges of things between men, exchanges which in no way affect the things as such. A thing retains the ‘properties’ whether it is owned by A or B,” (Marx in Sayer, 1989, p. 54). This represents the idea behind bartering without the abstract construction of money. He continues:

[The worker] must produce a general product – exchange value, or exchange value isolated by itself, individualized; money. On the other hand, the power that each individual exercises over the activity of other or over social wealth exists in him as the owner of exchange values, or money. He carries his social power, as also his connection with society, in his pocket (Marx in Sayer, 1989, p. 61).

Marx uses this concept to criticize Smith’s optimistic view of the free market, explaining that sacrifice, in terms of labor, give commodities a price – which, he contends is a “purely negative characterization” (Marx in Elster, 1986, p. 60).

In Marxist terms, the mass media is a means of mental production and owned by the capitalist ruling class, which disseminates its own ideology and extinguishes conflicting narratives or ideas (Marx & Engels in Curran et al., 1982). This perspective of the mass media assumes that the proletariat will accept the ideas of the bourgeoisie, or, as he writes: “the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force . . . the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (Marx in Tucker, 1972, p. 136).
Neo-Marxist critiques & the Media

Marx’s theories on the organization of labor – and particularly of the relationship of capitalism and the media – are important, but they have also been demystified over the generations, particularly when juxtaposed with critical-cultural studies (Durham & Kellner, 2012). These modern amendments and/or extensions are at the heart of what is commonly called neo-Marxist theory. According to Raymond Williams (1977), “major modern communication systems are now so evidently key institutions in advanced capitalist societies that they require the same kind of attention, at least initially, that is given to the institutions of industrial production and distribution” (p. 136). The first question put to the mass media in a neo-Marxist conversation would be: What is the commodity of the mass media? Dallas W. Smythe suggests the media’s commodity is “‘messages,’ ‘information,’ ‘images,’ ‘meaning,’ ‘entertainment,’ ‘education,’ ‘orientation,’ ‘manipulation,’ etc.” (Smythe in Durham & Kellner, 2012, p. 186). And, it is the audience that does the work of interpretation. Herman and Chomsky take this a step further when they write that those products instill “values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into institutional structures of the larger society . . . this role requires systematic propaganda” (Herman & Chomsky in Durham & Kellner, 2012, p. 204). Their propaganda model consists of a level of filters that deals with ownership of the media, advertising, sources, negative responses, and ideology as a control mechanism (Herman & Chomsky in Durham & Kellner, 2012). In their critique of mid-century American media, Herman and Chomsky suggest this all was seen through the filter of anticommunism. Today, the ideology would be capitalism itself, as suggested by Shoemaker and Reese (1995), thus, the mainstream media would play a tangible role in
the sports world by helping to sell tickets to events and merchandise. However, understanding how the audience interprets, or reads the message is beyond the scope of this project. How the media message is displayed (as a story on a website, in this instance) and produced (questions of ownership, organization and autonomy) is what is vital here. Herman and Chomsky (1988) define flak as “negative responses to a media statement of program” (p. 26). Journalists experience flak from capitalistic powers that aim to shape media messages for their benefit. Flak and its outcomes form the basis of a power relationship. The producers and presence of flak as experienced by the individual observed in this dissertation are explored in a later chapter.

Public Relations

To segue from Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model to Public Relations is not a stretch. While the product of mass media is messages, Public Relations (PR) uses messages to control “communication between an organization and its publics” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 6). It is a specific form of communication that barely disguises itself as propaganda in the name of selling a product. In sports, PR is defined as a function “designed to identify a sport organization’s key publics, evaluate its relationship with those publics, and foster desirable relationships between the sport organization and those key publics” (Stoldt, Dittmore & Branvold, 2006, p. 2). The “publics” are also called “stakeholders,” a term developed by Freeman (1984) in his Stakeholder Theory, which is the framework behind PR managers’ purposes in engaging with and prioritizing those stakeholders. Kent and Taylor (2002) point out that the communication between a corporate entity and its stakeholders is the crux of PR.
Pedersen et al. (2007) wrote that the Internet “laid the framework” for the current and growing position of digital media in the sport PR landscape (p. 213). In 2010, Kriemadis et al. explored the commercial benefits of using the Internet as a PR instrument for English and Greek football clubs. They identified four unique advantages of the Internet: 1.) as a new distribution channel, 2.) as a new means for communication and promotion, 3.) as a unique marketing research instrument, 4.) and a new means for segmentation and for targeting (Kriemadis et al., 2010). Further, all of these advantages are ones the clubs can operate and control almost immediately and without outside assistance, or without leaning upon the traditional media. This is important to note in this study because the University of Washington uses the Internet as its primary channel of distribution and attempts to utilize all four advantages.

Further, Ruihley et al. (2011) conducted a thorough content analysis detailing how large university athletic departments “use their websites to disseminate information and what information they choose to send” (p. 10). They found that many types of content are found on homepages athletic department sites – such as: marketing tools, listing of sports teams, news releases, athletic results from competition, statistics, history and tradition, displays of merchandise, and ticket information, as well as all kinds of multimedia, options to buy media such as original photos and DVDs, external advertising, social networking opportunities, and more. They concluded that this onslaught of content “waters down” any dominant message and “the qualities and the messages attached are lost” because there is too much being presented in one forum. They also found that “advertising clutter can create a mixed message for consumers” (p. 19), meaning the PR organ that is the website is less effective than it could be. The
University of Washington’s website, GoHuskies.com, is similar to the sites studied by Ruihley in that the range of content is vast and cluttered. An analysis of the site and its specific contents follows in Chapter 3.

The Sport/Media Complex

Popular commercial sport is tightly tied to the media and vice versa as they use each other to sell themselves (Hoch, 1972; Jhally, 1984; Wenner, 2004). This symbiosis has been present since the late 19th century when Joseph Pulitzer launched the first sports section in the New York Herald (Boyle, 2006). According to Jhally (1984), these “sports and media investors were able to create a mass consumption spectator-sports industry in the consolidation of monopoly capitalism” (p. 44). This relationship has come to be called the “Sport/Media Complex,” Jhally determined (1984). Lawrence Wenner (2004) further described this relationship between sport and media as a “vertical integration strategy aimed at maximizing the ways that complementary holdings can strengthen each other through cross-promotion and marketing to make the corporate whole stronger than the some of its parts” (p. 316). This synergy challenges Smythe’s answer as to what the media’s commodity is. Instead of messages, Jhally (1984) contends, the modern media’s commodity is an audience. With the audience serving as the desired product, media rights can be bought and sold, and the value of the “Viewing Day” and of audience demographics becomes implicit (Jhally, 1984). The ideology behind this is rooted in consumption. Writes Lipsky (1979):

I think it is quite clear that the sports team, as an analogic extension is profoundly congruent with the goals of administrative capitalism. It is no accident that the more complex and bureaucratic American society became, the more the corporate games of football and basketball rose to popularity (p. 85).
The loyalty to the team that is spewed by the media thus becomes self-fulfilling as the audience identifies itself through the Sport/Media Complex. Jhally (1984) writes:

The vital element here of course is that these community forms hide and distort the class nature of capitalist reality. In place of this, not in addition, the symbolic canopy of sports provides community on a regional and national basis. . . . The tragedy of sports is that they are used as vehicles of the capitalist production of isolation, through the mediation of mass communication spectacles (p. 54).

Controlling those spectacles – and accumulating more wealth – is paramount to the organization of labor and logic in sport. When this happens, Jhally (1984) contends, “the human interests of those involved become secondary to the material interests of those who run sport and media organizations” (Billings & Butterworth, 2012, p. 257). For this study, this ordering of priorities is vital as state-run universities – in this case, the University of Washington – put the accumulation of wealth ahead of students.

The Playing Field: The College Football Landscape

With the advent of the Internet, professional and big-time college teams were destined to get into the news business in order to maintain a tighter grip on the spectacle and to isolate their stakeholders. Large athletics departments have take advantage of this with their own radio, TV and web operations. The line between news and PR is elusive within these operations. In a 2011 Washington Post article, Farhi (2011) wrote: “In an earlier age, teams welcomed coverage as free publicity. Now, in an age when technology permits almost anyone to broadcast text, photos and videos instantly, some are far more wary of reporters, viewing them as info-competitors” (para. 4). The toolbox available to university athletic communications departments to provide its own messages has become increasingly heavier over the years. While it used to be that the “sports information director” would deliver pizzas to the local newspaper’s sports staff and pitch
story ideas to editors and writers, the role of the athletic department communications staff has changed in no uncertain terms (Helitzer, 1997). The advent of the Internet has given athletic departments their own publishing platforms from which to work, and social media, multimedia, and mobile applications have driven that self-publishing to new extents (Moore & Carlson, 2012).

The most profitable and popular college sports conference is the Southeastern Conference (SEC), which is comprised of 14 universities located in the South. It is home to college football juggernauts like powerhouses as Alabama, Auburn, and LSU, as well as basketball powerhouse Kentucky. In 2010, the SEC restricted credentialed media covering its games to publishing a limited number of game photos and demanding that the photos not be shared on other websites (Farhi, 2011). After editors came together in protest, the SEC backed down, but while “league and team officials acknowledge the news media’s needs . . . they also point out that sports are big businesses, too, with multibillion-dollar ‘partnerships’ with sponsors and TV broadcasters,” (Farhi, 2011, para. 12). Thus, conferences and teams in college athletics have huge stakes in controlling the spectacle and accumulating wealth. The amount of communication personnel that go into this control is staggering. The SEC employs 10 top administrators in media relations, marketing, and creative services – and this isn’t even including the staffs of people working at the SEC Digital Network, a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week cable network, website, mobile applications, and on-demand gallery. Each of the conference’s 14 teams has exclusively devoted staffs to do everything from write stories for the website to produce multimedia to facilitate the traditional media with interviews, credentials, and viewings of practice sessions.
Though their titles are different, these staffs are commonplace in college athletics as conferences and teams compete in a highly competitive control and money grab.

The Playing Field: The University of Washington

Such control and accumulation is the primary goal of the University of Washington’s athletics communication department. The athletic communications department at the University of Washington, a member of the Pac-12 Conference, has taken advantage of the sizeable digital toolbox in order to identify, produce, control, and distribute its messages to a desired audience of athletics recruits, season-ticket holders and donors, and potential customers (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011). The department’s approach has been unique, however, in terms of its personnel decisions, the content of its messages, and its approach to messaging and control. These decisions have tangible repercussions, as this study uncovers. The personnel, as well as the hierarchical and bureaucratic structures are further identified in Chapter Two.

Methods

A mixed-methods approach was utilized for this study as I base knowledge claims on problem-centered grounds and collected data sequentially to best explore the research questions, as suggested by John W. Creswell (2003). A recent rise in the legitimacy of the use of qualitative research methods makes it unnecessary to emphasize the strengths of such methods in comparison to quantitative methods (Creswell, 2003). However, it is still important to note the characteristics of qualitative research in order to analyze the appropriate strategies of inquiry given the specific research questions. These characteristics, as explained by Creswell (2003), are that qualitative research “takes place in a natural setting” in order to allow the researcher “to develop a level of detail
about the individual or place and to be highly involved in actual experiences of the participants,” that the research “uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic,” that the research “is emergent rather than tightly prefigured,” that it is “fundamentally interpretive,” and that the researcher “systematically reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study” (Creswell, 2003, pp. 181-182).

Given these characteristics, it is obvious to see how research results involving such strategies of inquiry produce differing results. The socially constructed realities uncovered by quantitative methods can be understood as external to the subject, but qualitative methods reveal socially constructed realities produced by the subjects’ understanding of such social constructions (Bryman, 1988). In this study, the social constructions of the routines of the media workers for UW’s athletics communication department were explored. To accomplish this, I observed, analyzed, and recorded these routines, conducted interviews with the participants, and analyzed the documents that were produced by the lead worker.

The University of Washington’s athletics department employs nine full-time media workers in the Athletic Communications office. This office is responsible for the department’s public relations, media relations, and its website, GoHuskies.com, which was initially launched in 1998. The lead content producer for GoHuskies.com is Gregg Bell, Director of Writing. Bell is a former sports reporter for the Associated Press and covered UW sports from October 2005 to August 2010, when UW hired him.

My ethnographic research entailed a month-long observation of Bell’s routines during the football team’s fall camp and through the first week of the football season. It
spanned 19 practices and/or media sessions and one regular-season game. I chose Bell and UW for the following reasons: 1.) Bell formerly served as an Associated Press (AP) sports writer who covered UW sports. Given that many unemployed sports journalists are turning to the PR field for employment, this professional dynamic was one I was curious to observe and study. 2.) The UW was among the first athletic departments to hire a former traditional media professional who covered the program in that capacity to produce exclusive content for the department. 3.) The UW athletic communication department’s website, GoHuskies.com, generates significant traffic. 4.) I am familiar with both Bell and many members of the UW athletic communication department and gaining access was not an insurmountable obstacle.

After securing approval from Ohio University’s Institutional Review Board, I observed Bell’s daily duties, interactions, and relationships during the 2012 fall camp and through the first week of the regular season. Fall camp started with an August 6 news conference and practice. The first game of the season took place September 1, 2012. The UW staff granted me credentials for access to news conferences, practices, the field before the game, the press box during the game, all interview areas, and all other access Bell enjoyed while observing the GoHuskies.com staff. I took ethnographic notes during this observation, which were transcribed after each session. These sessions began with the kickoff news conference and a media luncheon at which Bell was one of 45 media workers and university employees (including athletics communication staff) present. The sessions included 12 practices at which Bell was present with at least two other members of the athletics communication staff and typically three to 12 traditional media members.
The fieldwork also included eight unstructured interviews with Bell, his superiors, colleagues, subordinates, and subjects. The interviews were based on the participant observations, as well as the content Bell produced. The interviews were either digitally recorded and transcribed later, or recorded manually in a notebook and transcribed later.

Finally, I analyzed 23 articles that Bell wrote and that were published on GoHuskies.com from August 5 to September 2, 2012. The number of articles was tallied and I assigned categories to the articles as identified by Ruihley et al. (2011). However, more analysis of these articles would be considered for future research. Other documents analyzed for this study included the University of Washington Athletics’ “Strategic Communication Plan” (see Appendix A) and the Athletics Communication Financial Status Report. Both were obtained by filing a public records request to the UW Public Information Office.

Reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher’s contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of remaining apart from subject matter while conducting research (Willig, 2001). Reflexivity then, prompts us “to explore the ways in which a researcher’s involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research” (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999, p. 228). I brought a unique presence into both the observation and the interview phases of this research as I previously served as a sports journalist for a traditional media outlet in Seattle. For five years, I exclusively covered the UW football team, college football, and other sports at UW. This information needs to be disclosed to ensure transparency in the name of ethical research, as well as to
establish reflexivity for reliability and validity. I knew Bell when he served as an AP writer, but I had not before this study seen him act in his duties as Director of Writing. The coaching staff and most of the athletics communication department had turned over since I covered the team. None of the players I covered as a reporter was on the team I studied for this dissertation, but many of the beat writers and broadcasters that I had worked with were present during the observation phase (at practices, news conferences, etc.) Further, the UW Director of Athletics, Scott Woodward, had had a professional relationship with me prior to this observation. I interviewed Woodward for this study and found that the dynamic of the interview very much resembled the dynamic of when I, as a journalist, interviewed him rather than as an academic researcher.

This study appears to have no other ethical hurdles.
CHAPTER 2: THE GAME PLAN

“The glory of sport is witnessing a well-coached team perform as a single unit, striving for a common goal and ultimately bringing distinction to the jersey the players represent.”

– ESPN sportscaster Dick Vitale

This chapter introduces readers to Seattle, the University of Washington, and its athletics department’s political and economic positioning therein. If further introduces readers to the athletics communication personnel at UW, as well as the hierarchical and bureaucratic structures employed within the athletic department.

Seattle, Washington is a geographically secluded major metropolis pressed into the northwest corner of the United States. With the Olympic Peninsula separating it from the Pacific Ocean to the west, Seattle is bordered to the east by Lake Washington and the Cascade Mountains, a range separating it from an expansive desert. The 2010 census counted the city’s population at 608,660 with almost 30% of the state’s population residing in King County, of which Seattle is the seat. This is an 8% increase from 2000 (Department of Planning & Development, 2012). Young adults between 18-34 comprise a third of the city’s population, and the percent of Seattleites 25 or older with a college degree is 62% (Department of Planning & Development, 2012). Politically, Seattle is a liberal mecca and, with its large population, tilts the state’s participation in federal elections toward the Democratic party. It is home to a world-renowned research university in the University of Washington and the city benefits from the state’s abundance of natural resources in timber, farm produce (particularly potatoes and wheat), and fish. Home to the Microsoft Corporation, Internet retailer Amazon.com, and Starbucks Coffee, it is also a global business and technology hub. As the original and
former corporate home to Boeing Industries, it is also heavily influenced by the aviation industry.

Founded in 1861, the University of Washington is ranked 16th among the world’s top 500 universities, according to the 2012 Academic Ranking of World Universities (“Academic Ranking of World Universities,” 2012). It is the third-largest employer in the state of Washington with nearly 70,000 employers on its payroll, including 4,300 faculty members (“UW Fact Sheet,” 2012). In Fall 2012, UW enrolled 42,570 students, 65% of which were undergraduates, and it boasts an endowment of nearly $3 billion. The 703-acre Seattle campus is situated against the northwest shore of Lake Washington and among its most successful graduates are four Nobel laureates, eight Pulitzer Prize-winners, U.S. senators and congressmen, governors, leaders in science and space, as well as current Apple chairman Arthur Levinson, President and CEO of Alaska Airlines William Ayer, and Costco founder Jeffrey Brotman.

Figure 2. Photo of the University of Washington. Source: SACNAS.org
Many of the power brokers and bourgeoisie of Seattle are UW alumni and donate large sums of money to both the academic and athletic arms of the school. Consider Neal Dempsey, for example, a general partner with Bay Partners, a 35-year-old venture capital firm with close to $1 billion under management in more than 250 successful businesses (“Building for our future,” 2012). In 2001, Dempsey donated $5 million to the athletic department for the construction of an 80,000 square-foot indoor training facility for varsity sports named in his honor. Ron Crockett is another huge donor and a regular at football practices, as I witnessed during the ethnographic observations for this study. As of 2008, Crockett, who had built a successful airplane-maintenance business and helped found and build the area’s horse racing track Emerald Downs, had donated nearly $4 million to the university and was “instrumental in raising $90 million in donations for improvements to university athletic facilities” (Pulkkinen, 2008, para. 8). Other large-scale donors include an area construction mogul, a real estate guru and commercial lender, a financial consultant, and a lawyer (Pulkkinen, 2008). To help with the 2012 renovation of Husky Stadium, Joseph Ryan donated $2 million. Ryan, a member of the 1964 UW team that played in the Rose Bowl, is the chairman and CEO of Ryan Investments LLC, a private firm with investments in the hospitality industry, the alternative energy business, and private banking. In return for the substantial donation, the tunnel the football team will use to enter the field of play in the newly-renovated stadium will be named after Ryan. Understanding the athletic department’s connections with the rich and powerful is critical to this study as it is these relationships that position the university’s athletic department within the capitalist class. As it was
pointed out in Chapter One, Marx noted that the capitalist class must exploit the sacrifice of the proletariat to maximize profit and to maintain its position and influence (Williams, 2003; Marx, 1903). At the heart of these donor relationships is an exchange value in which the athletic department provides the donors with exclusive access, premium seating to events, and other special treatment. These department-donor relationships help to fortify the backbone of the social relation of the exploitation of the worker and the society that evolves from such exploitation, as explained by Marx in Chapter One. Further, as this study will later show, the messages produced by the athletics communication staff are used, in part, to explicitly strengthen these relationships.

The Department of Intercollegiate Athletics (“athletic department”) at UW is comprised of 166 full-time administrative and maintenance staff, as well as 82 coaches and athletic staffers. It operates on a budget of roughly $70 million. Outside of coaching and team-oriented duties (which are left to coaches and athletic staffers), the administrative staff oversees and conducts academic services for athletes, ticket sales and fund-raising, athletic and strength training for athletes, facility management and maintenance, business and finance for the department, athletic equipment for all sports and athletes, computer systems, compliance with National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules, marketing and athletic communications. This study focuses on the roles and routines of the latter – athletic communications.

Director of Athletics Scott Woodward (“athletic director”) oversees the entire athletic department. Woodward arrived at UW in 2004 on the inaugural staff of university president Mark Emmert, who he followed to Seattle from Louisiana State
Woodward initially served as the vice president of external affairs, from where he managed the university’s offices of federal relations, state relations, regional affairs, as well as the university’s departments of marketing, media relations, and communications. When athletic director Todd Turner resigned under pressure in 2007, Emmert named Woodward the interim athletic director and Woodward took over in a permanent capacity the following year. A native of Louisiana, Woodward graduated from Louisiana State University with a Bachelor’s degree in political science. Prior to his tenure in higher education and athletics, he had an extensive background in politics as both a policy consultant and a lobbyist, as well as in communication as he started a government and public relations firm in Baton Rouge, according to the university’s website (“Scott Woodward,” 2012).

In addition to overseeing the entire athletic department and its budgets, Woodward also heads an executive team that is comprised of five senior associate athletic directors. Among the senior associate athletic directors is O.D. Vincent, who oversees football operations and “is also charged with leading the athletic department's external affairs, including marketing, brand development, athletic communications and corporate relationships” (“O.D. Vincent,” 2012). Vincent was a college golfer at UW, graduating in 1990. He had a brief professional career before starting a career in coaching. He was serving as the men’s golf coach at Duke University in Durham, N.C. when Woodward offered him his current position in 2009.

Serving directly under Vincent is Carter Henderson, who was hired in July 2010 as the director of public relations. He was promoted a year later to assistant athletic
director for Athletic Communications. Prior to 2010, Henderson served for a year as the
director of creative services for the athletic department at Jacksonville University after a
three-year stint as the director of marketing and tickets at the same university. A 2004
graduate of the University of Florida, Henderson majored in journalism. Henderson
helps to oversee UW’s Athletic Communications staff, which is charged with two tasks
according to the Strategic Communications Plan (see Appendix A) that Henderson
largely authored: “Editorial Messaging” and “Media & Constituent Relations.”
Henderson is most involved in Editorial Messaging, which includes the branding of
editorial content, social media, “Dawgs Digest” (a monthly glossy magazine produced
for boosters and alumni), the department’s written correspondence, recruiting
correspondence, advancement messaging, and creative communications (Department of
Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011). According the plan, the objective is to “increase the
level of user’s engagement by fostering a greater sense of brand affinity” (Department of
Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011, p. 1).

Henderson began his tenure at UW as a director, which is a parallel position to
the director of Athletic Communications (Jeffrey Bechtold) and director of writing
(Gregg Bell.) His promotion and title change seemed to advance his authority,
particularly over Bechtold and Bell. As witnessed in the ethnographic observations, this
seemed to be confirmed and will be vetted further in Chapters Three and Four. Bechtold,
who has worked in the UW athletic department for 23 years, handles the day-to-day
duties of media relations with the football and baseball teams. The objective of his
position, according to the Strategic Communications Plan, is to “disseminate
information as efficiently as possible so that media outlets can report effectively” (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011, p. 1).

During the month-long period of observation for this study, Bechtold’s primary role took place at football practices where he secured football players and coaches after the workouts for media members to interview. He also coordinated the credentialing of media members. Traditional journalists from the Seattle Times, Tacoma News Tribune, Everett Herald, as well as the UW student newspaper The Daily attended most practice sessions, as well as the kickoff news conference and game. (Five practice sessions were closed to media members and non-football-related staff.) Bechtold assisted these members of the media, as well as those working for recruiting websites Dawgman.com (affiliated with the CBS Sports-owned Scout.com), the independently owned and operated RealDawg.com, and a reporter who covers recruiting for ESPN.com. (The reporters for these sites cover both the recruitment of high school football players, as well as day-to-day happenings with the football team. They are credentialed to games and are afforded the same access as traditional journalists.) On game day, Bechtold produced and coordinated game notes – a compilation of information such as statistics, interesting facts on players, and history of the matchup – for media members and coordinated the post-game press conference and player interviews. Both Bechtold and Bell attended each practice session open to the media in order to, respectively, facilitate the traditional media members and to gather information for stories for GoHuskies.com. Henderson attended just one practice session during my observation period, as well as the season-opening news conference and first game of the season. At those events, he did not assist Bechtold or Bell in any athletic communications-related duties, nor did he...
sit in the press box with them or other Athletic Communications staffers at the game. At
the practice session he attended, Henderson stayed for just a few minutes after saying
hello to some media members and watching a few minutes of the practice.

After an award-winning sports writing career at the Associated Press (AP) and
the *Sacramento Bee*, Bell accepted the position of director of writing in UW’s Athletics
Communications department in August 2010. He writes daily news stories and a weekly
column for the athletic department’s website *GoHuskies.com*. He also writes
departmental letters signed by the director of athletics, recruiting literature that goes out
to prospective athletes, and more. Those duties, however, are secondary to his duty to
produce content for *GoHuskies.com*. Before getting into journalism, Bell was a tactical
intelligencer officer with the U.S. Army for five years after graduating from the U.S.
Military Academy at West Point. He is the only athletic communications staffer to work
out of his home, much like he did when he was a sports writer for the AP in Seattle. He
attends practices and games, but largely works outside of the realm of the athletic
department. Bell’s routines and roles are explored and detailed further in Chapter Four.

It should be noted here that all of the above – Woodward, Vincent, Henderson,
Bechtold, and Bell – are white males. While the ordering of gender and race is not
central to this study, it is tangential to it. The theories of Marxist feminism focus on the
social institution of capitalism, the accumulation of capital, and the division of labor to
explain gender and racial inequality and oppression (Ferguson & Hennessy, 2010). That
the identified workers involved in the production of the messages that promote, uphold,
and maintain the political and economic positioning of the UW’s athletic department are
all white and male speaks to the connection between the bourgeoisie and athletic
department, as well as to the intended audience. This will be further discussed in Chapter Five.

The workings of the athletic department and, specifically, the athletic communications staff are intimately intertwined given in that the products of the athletic communications staff – the articles and other media listed above – serve to promote the athletic department to an audience specifically identified in the Strategic Communications Plan. That audience is “recruits,” “fan base,” and “future fans” (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011, p. 1) According to Henderson, the target audience is the “recruit, current ticket-holder or engaged person… a donor, whatever, maybe a future donor, future engaged person” (C.S. Henderson, personal communication, August 28, 2012). The overlap and synergy of the relationships of these employees is obvious as the athletic communications staff work within the athletic department. However, the coaching staffs of UW’s 19 varsity sports operate largely adjacent to this sphere. Coaches’ offices, for example, are in a separate building from those of administrators. Teams operate within their own specified budgets. Team-specific directors of operations handle travel arrangements, recruiting budgets, meeting and practice planning. Coaches still would fall under Woodward and their corresponding senior associate athletic director in a hypothetical flow chart, but team coaches remain mostly autonomous and operate outside of the bureaucratic structure of the senior associate-associate-assistant athletic director/director roles assigned to other staff. This structure, however, is blurred when it comes to football and the athletic communications staff.
On December 8, 2008, Woodward introduced Steve Sarkisian as the Washington Huskies’ 23rd head football coach. It was Sarkisian’s first head coaching position after serving as the offensive coordinator at the University of Southern California, where he had coached for seven years. Young, handsome, and enthusiastic, Sarkisian was a sharp contrast to his more mature, stoic predecessor Tyrone Willingham, who had been fired just two months earlier during a 2008 season that saw the Huskies go winless in 12 games. Sarkisian, who earned a degree in sociology from Brigham Young University (BYU), had attended a junior college before two successful years on the field for BYU. After college, he played three seasons in the Canadian Football League before getting into coaching (Yanity, 2008). In his first four seasons as head coach, Sarkisian led the Huskies to a 26-25 overall record. From the 2010 season through the most recent in 2012, the Huskies have gone 7-6 and advanced to lucrative postseason bowl games. Despite compiling a mediocre record in four seasons, Sarkisian received a lucrative contract extension that increased his pay, made buyout options more favorable, and added performance and academic incentives, such as a $25,000 bonus for making the conference championship game and up to $125,000 for graduation rates that surpass 80% (Condotta, 2011). Sarkisian, 39, has been heavily involved in the marketing of himself as coach and of the football program since his arrival at UW with the help of his director of football operations, Jared Blank. Blank oversees Sarkisian’s Twitter account, his Facebook page, his website CoachSark.com and many multimedia components of that site that fall under the byline “Think Tank Productions,” (which is also the name of publishing arm of ICON Studies, which specializes in the independent production of comic books and graphic novels, but unrelated.) While Sarkisian and Blank produce the
coach-specific website and its content, they also have directly inserted themselves into
the bureaucratic processes of the athletic communications staff. This is further identified
and explored in Chapter Four.

This chapter introduced readers to Seattle, the University of Washington, and its
athletic department’s political and economic positioning therein. The athletic
department, given its exclusive relationships and financial ties with area power brokers,
situates itself among the politically and economically elite. The personnel given the
charge of cultivating, upholding, and promoting those relationships – thus given the
charge of keeping the athletic department in its own position of power – have formed a
bureaucratic structure detailed in the previous chapter. The following chapter examines
the content of GoHuskies.com and focuses on the types of stories produced, as well as
the topics of the specific content published and how they align with the Athletic
Communications department’s Strategic Communications Plan and with reality.
CHAPTER 3: THE CONTENT

“Don't use words too big for the subject. Don’t say ‘infinitely’ when you mean ‘very’; otherwise you’ll have no word left when you want to talk about something really infinite.”

– C.S. Lewis

During the four-week timeframe of my observation, Gregg Bell wrote 23 stories that were published on GoHuskies.com. Twenty-one of the stories were about the football team and/or specific football players. One story was about a volleyball player, and another was a tribute to a long-time football and basketball usher who died in August 2012. As referenced in Chapter One, Ruihley et al.’s content analysis coding categories for the components of the athletic department websites are “Product,” “Price,” “Promotion,” “Place,” “Social Network,” and “Other” (Ruihley et al., 2011). Given UW assistant athletic director for communications Carter Henderson’s explanation of the purpose of the stories, as told to me in an unstructured interview, this study places Bell’s stories in the “Product” category. Other subcategories in the “Product” category are: “Athletic results,” “History/tradition,” “Listing of sports,” “Merchandise/Store,” “News releases,” “Statistics,” and “Tickets.” The subcategories were created by Ruihley et al. (2011). One of those subcategories – “News releases” – could also be classified as “breaking news,” or stories with the specific intent of being the first to announce something UW sports-related, such as a coaching hire, an announcement of an award. Henderson explained to me that that type of story is less of a priority for Bell as compared to his features.

Henderson says of the purpose behind Bell’s features:

We look to [Bell’s] position to find new ways to tell the stories of our student-athletes. I think, on the communications side, that is one of the main ways we
can really support our revenue-generation efforts. Breaking news doesn’t really sell those tickets, but if we can produce a compelling feature about, you know, whatever it is, that might motivate someone to come and engage with the program.

An example I was talking about… if I’m a football season-ticket holder, and I read a feature about a volleyball player who is from my hometown, they just really get captivated by it, maybe they go to one or two volleyball games a year. And from there we are trying to trigger that next step of engagement. (C.S. Henderson, personal communication, August 28, 2012).

Just like a link on the website to purchase tickets to an athletic event, the features Bell produces are intended to sell tickets and merchandise. Given Henderson’s transparent description of the “selling” function of these stories, they become key pieces in the “production, distribution, exchange, and consumption” connection that Marx described in Chapter One – a connection that insists upon exploitation (Marx, 1903, p. 8).

In content and textual analysis, researchers can examine the surface content, or the manifest content – what is visible. We can also look for implicit, or underlying meanings found in latent content (Ford, 2012).

As a first step, this chapter examines the manifest content of GoHuskies.com describing what Bell has written. It focuses on the types of stories produced, as well as the topics of the specific content published, and how these stories fit within the charges of the Athletics Communications department and within the parameters of reality. I follow the specific examples with discussion and analysis of the website’s latent content, the underlying meaning of the communication, discussing what Bell’s work might mean in relationship to the research questions posed here. Latent content also includes what is not present on GoHuskies.com and what that implies.
Fifteen of the stories Bell wrote during the time of my observation are feature stories that include a paragraph at the end, set off by a sub-headline of either “INSIDE CAMP” or “INSIDE THE DAWGS.” In newspapers, these would be called the “three-dot items” at the end of “notebooks,” which simply offer snippets of information rather than descriptive narratives. Six of the features were about individual players, such as a senior offensive lineman who was known for his stubborn personality, and another about a sophomore linebacker who suffered a major knee injury as a high school quarterback. The former of those stories was also published in a glossy game program. The Athletic Communications staff contributes content to these game programs, but they are not produced or distributed by this department. Despite drawing a team-reported 53,742 fans for the season-opening game, approximately only 2,000 game programs were sold – a typical number, Bell said. After a practice session, Bell interviewed Drew Schaefer, the stubborn lineman, for the feature that ran on GoHuskies.com, as well as in the game program. Upon concluding his line of questions, Bell did something he likely would not have done when he was working as an AP reporter. He asked Schaefer: “Is there anything else you’d like in the story?” Schaefer thanked Bell for that. Bell told me after the interview he liked to ask that of the players who were featured in the game programs since they could be saved as a memento and collected by family members. This question opens the decision of the content of Bell’s story to the athlete. In this instance – and in most, Bell said – the athlete does not have any special requests.

Bell wrote two other stories that focused on position units – the group of running backs, for example, and a defense playing under a new defensive coordinator. These stories were largely shaped by the availability of coaches and players on the days they
were published. For example, on August 14, all players were available for Bell and members of the traditional media to interview. However, only defensive assistant coaches and the head coach, Steve Sarkisian, were available for interviews. Thus, Bell’s story, which was published that evening a few hours after the 3:15 p.m. practice concluded, focused on the defense with several quotes from new defensive coordinator Justin Wilcox (Bell, August 14, 2012). Interestingly, the topics of the traditional media’s next-day stories also reflected the availability of coaches. Bell’s story published on GoHuskies.com used many of the same subjects and discussed the same players as those in the traditional media. The same players – such as linebacker Travis Feeney – were mentioned because the same coaches talked about them. Bell also suggested to me at this point that his article on the improvement of the Huskies’ defense under Wilcox likely would have been a story he would have written had he still been writing for the AP.

Another feature focuses on the growing depth of the team (Bell, August 13, 2012). Published during the second week of camp, this feature noted how many quality players were available at several different positions. The story positively stated: “This depth is the evolution of a rising program” (Bell, August 13, 2012, para. 14). With no tangible measure to assess this “evolution” and the fact that, in hindsight, the team had the exact same record in 2012 as it did in 2011 and 2010, this was an excessively positive outlook.

Five other features focused on the action at practice sessions, including one session that ended with the players and coaches taking a plunge into Lake Washington at the conclusion of the session. On Thursday, August 16, 2012, the temperature reached
the mid-90s, which is particularly hot by Pacific Northwest standards. There is no natural shade on the team’s practice field and the only shaded area is from a tent off to the side under which a training table sits and where members of the media and non-coaching staff could stand. However, the view of the field is obstructed from the shaded area and media and staff members typically stood on the sideline of the practice field. Thus, the sun shined directly on the field and the players without obstruction. The media members and staff passed around sunscreen. Everyone but the players wore sunglasses. Sarkisian cut the practice session short and ordered the team to take their jerseys and equipment off and jump into the nearby lake. Sarkisian also shortened his media availability so that he, too, could “cannonball” off the dock into the lake – a plunge that was photographed for the eventual GoHuskies.com story. In a developed story four days later, Bell used the scenario as a metaphor to showcase Sarkisian’s youthfulness and his social connection to the players (Bell, August 20, 2012). The lake episode was mentioned in the “INSIDE CAMP”, notebook-style footer at the end of a feature on the day it occurred, but it was expanded and published the following Monday with quotes from players and descriptive language about how fun the head coach could be. For example:

“He just has a really good feel for this team,” said Schaefer, who had just finished his first, redshirt year when Sarkisian and his staff arrived from USC in January 2009. “This is his fourth year. Guys have been in the system for a long time now. And he can kind of just sense things.

“He demands a lot, and we put out a lot. I think he recognizes that. Sometimes there is a little bit of fun needed, especially in this type of setting, three weeks into camp.” …

Sarkisian’s deft touch with the team off the field is no small reason why his Huskies are among the half dozen teams in the last half century to make two
bowl games three seasons immediately following a winless one (Bell, August 20, 2012, paras. 14-15, 17.)

This story clearly shined a positive light on the head coach and selling the image of successful leadership is explicitly laid out in the Strategic Communications Plan. One of the five “brand pillars” of the plan is “Leadership” (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011, p. 7). Despite employing more than 80 coaches, UW features a photo of Sarkisian on this page to represent the pillar of leadership. Athletic Communications staffers are expected to utilize this pillar in its PR messaging which, as stated previously, is targeted at recruits, season-ticket holders (and donors), and potential season-ticket holders and donors. This pillar is described in the plan as follows:

Behind every successful team is a great leader, and the University of Washington has no shortage of either. Attempting to mentor and lead a group of 18-24 year-olds is a challenging endeavor, but the rewards are immeasurable and gratifying.

Whether instilling winning disciplines in a program or guiding and athletic department without any university subsidy through an economic recession, leading is about doing the right thing. Head coaches and department administrators set the example for over 600 student-athletes, and the Huskies would their coaching staff up, top to bottom, against any other in the NCAA (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011, p. 7).

Further, the only recognizable face found in the 18-page “The 2012 Husky Football Season Ticket Renewal Playbook” is that of Sarkisian. This glossy-covered, color “playbook” offered season-ticket packages of up to $1,349 per seat. Hence, Sarkisian’s image is directly associated with the selling of the package – a fact Bell noted and described in more detail in Chapter Four.

The final story among the 15 features was a lengthy article about the progress on the Husky Stadium renovation, which was taking place directly to the east of the team’s practice field. All of these stories were positive in tone and function to “foster desirable...
relationships between the sport organization and those key publics” (Stoldt, Dittmore & Branvold, 2006, p. 2), or, in other words, to serve a key PR role. The lead of the following story about the stadium renovation exemplifies this. It reads:

SEATTLE – For now, it’s just a concrete slab with steps onto what will become a patio overlooking the field.

But the view on a crystal-clear Friday afternoon from what will be coach Steve Sarkisian’s office in Washington’s new football operations building teased how spectacular the new Husky Stadium will be (Bell, August 25, 2012).

The “INSIDE CAMP” footer at the end of each of these articles offers more details about the day’s practice sessions. For example, Bell details the team’s health report by mentioning players who returned to practice after sustaining injuries, but only once announcing when a player was initially injured in order to minimalize the bad news. That injury was to Nate Fellner, a starting safety. He was carted off the field right in front of the traditional media members. It was eventually revealed that he broke his foot, which needed surgery to repair. The injury and rehabilitation kept Fellner out of all but three games in 2012. Other players would leave drills, or go to the medical tent where trainers would examine them, but these incidences went unmentioned. Rather, the health reports typically held a positive tone – even when the news was not good. For example:

LB Jamaal Kearse was wearing a walking book a day after he learned he had a stress fracture in his lower left leg, around the shin. WR James Johnson was wearing a hard wrap over his bent right arm a day after dislocating his elbow. Sarkisian said both starters will be out indefinitely, but that he hopes to have back “sooner rather than later” (Bell, August 24, 2012).

One major injury was transformed into a feel-good story. On the first day of camp, projected starting running back Deontae Cooper tore the anterior cruciate
ligament in his knee – for the third time in two-plus years. Bell’s story was not about the injury itself, but about Cooper’s resilience (Bell, August 11, 2012). Bell used words and phrases such as “determined,” “irrepressible,” “maintained an infectious smile,” and a “positive disposition.” Cooper was quoted as saying, “I’m going to be right. I’ll be in good shape, ready to go next year, definitely” and “Don’t sleep on me (Bell, August 11, 2012, paras. 14-15). Bell and I discussed this story and he said it is actually Cooper’s positive outlook that is newsworthy. I asked Bell if he could have made a call to an arthroscopic surgeon, or a team doctor to see what kind of chances are realistic for Cooper to make an effective comeback. Bell paused before answering, “That is something I might have done before [as an AP writer]. I guess I could have done that,” (Bell, G., personal communication, August 14, 2012).

In the “INSIDE CAMP” section of the features, Bell also noted particularly impressive plays from the day’s practice session. These plays served the charge of the Strategic Communications Plan in that the tone was definitely positive. For instance, in the following case, Bell used two examples from one practice to encourage fans about the team’s defense. During my observation period, I felt the defensive plays were highlighted with more enthusiasm than might have been realistic. This served a purpose, however. In 2011, the Huskies defense was not very good and this consistently mediocre to poor performance led to the firing of UW’s defensive coordinator and the hiring of a new one. New defensive coordinator Justin Wilcox was given a lot of credit for the good plays that were noted in the “INSIDE CAMP” paragraphs. Here is an example:

Defensive backs continued to make aggressive plays on passes using new coordinator Justin Wilcox’s in-your-face coverage schemes. Tre Watson leaped to intercept a pass on a post route run by Kendyl Taylor, drawing roars and high-
fives from defensive coaches and players. Marcus Peters jumped with Kasen Williams, the Washington state high school high-jump champion a couple years ago, to break up a reception at the sideline (Bell, August 24, 2012).

Bell wrote one feature that did not include an update from the previous day’s practice. It was a profile of an offensive lineman who had dislocated his kneecap in the spring. There were no practice updates because the practice session that day was closed to members of the traditional media and non-football-related staff – this included Bell. In other words, a practice took place, but Bell was not allowed to view it. So, he had interviewed the lineman earlier in the week and ran the story that evening without an “INSIDE CAMP” footer.

The other articles Bell wrote for GoHuskies.com during the period of my observation included a breaking-news story published on August 7 that announced a 2013 game at Chicago’s Soldier Field against the University of Illinois, a game preview, and a game story published shortly after UW’s 21-12 season-opening win over San Diego State. These were written very much in the AP style that Bell had practiced for years and had a similar tone as the stories that the traditional media outlets published. The remaining four articles he produced have become his staple – a weekly, long-form profile of a UW athlete that includes his opinions. These pieces are called “Unleashed” and are published to the site each Wednesday. They are archived on the site with photographs and graphics unique to the feature. The archive to all of his “Unleashed” features is linked to from one of eight tabs located at the top of the GoHuskies.com home page with its own custom “Gregg Bell Unleashed” graphical logo.

Bell wrote four “Unleashed” profiles while I was observing his routines. The first, published August 8, was about tight end Austin Seferian-Jenkins, one of the
Huskies’ best players. Seferian-Jenkins had visited Seattle Children’s Hospital the previous spring and met Ruby Smith, a 17-year-old patient with Burkitt’s Lymphoma. Seferian-Jenkins had promised to attend Smith’s prom with her, but her condition made attending prom impossible, so, on his own accord, Seferian-Jenkins went to the hospital on Smith’s 18th birthday with a purple corsage and a birthday card. One week later, Smith died. The story ran on the website with photos Smith had taken from her hospital bed while she was sick, though none with Seferian-Jenkins. Bell interviewed Seferian-Jenkins, Smith’s parents, Seferian-Jenkins’ teammate quarterback Keith Price, and Sarkisian. He wrote an emotionally charged, heart-felt story that was enjoyable to read. I watched Bell interview Seferian-Jenkins and felt he captured the genuine kindness of the football player, despite the young man’s cliché-riddled quotes. The story was a resounding success as Huskies fans send Bell emails praising both the piece and Seferian-Jenkins. Fans mention it in the live chat he conducted during the first game and it was successful in terms of traffic as it drew nearly 16,000 unique visitors from the day it was published to the end of the observation period. (In comparison, there were just two stories that hit more than 10,000 unique visitors during camp the year before, and the story that got the most viewers during that time was the preview to the season-opening game. It recorded 11,891 visitors.) Further, the article set a new precedent. The Kitsap Sun, Seferian-Jenkins’s hometown newspaper, asked Bell for permission to reprint the story. The Athletic Communications staff granted the permission and sports editor Chuck Stark ran the piece in full on the front of the sports section on August 16. Much of Bell’s work could cross over and work in the local newspapers. This observation is explored further in Chapter Five.
The *Sun* typically buys its Huskies coverage from the *Tacoma News Tribune*, Stark said. Stark said in an interview with me that he did not see any ethical problems relating to running the story from UW’s own website and attributing it as such. He said:

> Any more, that’s not an issue. In the old days? Maybe. But at the smaller papers, everyone trades. That’s the way the industry is now. It’s a little different with [Bell], too, since he used to be one of us. Also, it’d be different if we had a beat guy [to cover the Huskies.] We don’t and Gregg has that inside access (Stark, personal communication, Sept. 1, 2012).

Bell was proud of this and said he hoped it could set a precedent as his work distributed the athletic department’s messaging via a traditional media outlet.

Henderson, however, was less certain of the delivery because he believes audiences of the traditional media still see Bell as an insider, even if it’s just a “subconscious deal.” He continued:

> I still think they see through the filter of, “Gregg Bell is their [UW’s] guy, so he’s writing with purple and gold glasses on. … I should say the ideal is that we would get people to the point where they really see — and I don’t know how they really see it — that everyone would view [GoHuskies.com content] as the neutral news source that it really is. Then we can deliver it and then it could be totally accessible and it could be in our house. But, if we are going to go the traditional media angle, we would want the messaging objectives we’re looking for (C.S. Henderson, personal communication, August 28, 2012).

Henderson seems to be claiming that GoHuskies.com is a “neutral news source” in this quotation. This is at odds with the Strategic Communications Plan that neither defines "news," nor speaks anything of thorough, fair, and balanced coverage. Rather, it states that the objective of the editorial messaging is to “Increase the level of user’s engagement by fostering a greater sense of brand affinity” (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011, p. 1). Further, the plan lays out methods of coverage with specific target audiences and a “recommended tone.” For feature stories, for example,
the target audience is listed as “Any and all visitors to GoHuskies.com,” and the recommended tone is “emotional features should tell the stories of UW athletics in a positive light” (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011, p. 4).

After the “Unleashed” feature on Austin Seferian-Jenkins ran, Bell had lined up interviews for his next weekly column – a story about sophomore Danny Shelton, who had a successful freshman season playing defensive tackle. Shelton’s story included much more than what happened on the field, however. In May 2011, Shelton was with his brothers when two of them were shot. One died on the scene and another was rushed to Harborview Medical Center, the only trauma center in Seattle. The gunman who killed his brother was never charged. According to police documents, the gunman was acting in self-defense. This narrative was never included in the local newspapers’ coverage of the event when it happened in 2011 – perhaps because there was no trial to cover. The legal action, or lack thereof in this case, happened quietly and no local reporter followed up on it as Shelton was enjoying success on the field and in the classroom. However, the police records suggest another narrative as the shootings occurred after an escalation of a street fight that led to the Shelton brothers surrounding the shooter’s home and threatening him. Further, after the shooting, Shelton severely beat the gunman with the handle of the gun. For the story, Bell interviewed Shelton and Sarkisian and position coach Johnny Nansen, both who went to the hospital to console Shelton the night of the shootings. Despite finishing the story for the next week’s publication date, it would be weeks before this story found its way to GoHuskies.com. This will be further discussed in Chapter Four as Bell was, in this instance, put on the leash.
When it became apparent to Bell that this story would not run on its scheduled August 15 date, he scrambled to write another story. He found an athlete-overcomes-injury story on the volleyball team and wrote about Amanda Gil, who endured surgeries to her leg and knee before returning to the court, under the headline “How Can You Not Root for Amanda Gil?” (Bell, August 15, 2012). The volleyball team would host its first home match of the season the following week, so this story was still timely, stuck to the charge of the strategic communication plan of being a compelling feature written in a positive tone. The story concluded with the following two sentences:

“I want to play. I want to be the best leader for this team,” Amanda said, excitedly. “I want to help us get to the Pac-12 championship and to win a national championship.”

To me, seems like she's already won (Bell, August 15, 2012, paras. 58-59).

The next Wednesday, Bell’s “Unleashed” column was devoted to George Hickman, a long-time usher at UW football and basketball games, who died the previous Sunday (Bell, August 22, 2012). Hickman had been one of the original Tuskegee Airmen and, due partly to their military backgrounds, forged a personal relationship with Bell. While he typically used first-person mentions in the “Unleashed” columns, this particular story included more than usual and was a powerful story that revealed a notion that was plain to see – I felt Bell captured the essence of Hickman, a man I knew, as well. I knew him from my own time covering UW sports as he had served as the press box usher for every football and basketball game I covered. Local media members not covering the story, as well as current and former athletes, coaches, administrators, and friends unaffiliated with the university showed up at a tribute to Hickman that was hosted at UW’s Hec Edmundson Pavilion, the basketball arena.
The final “Unleashed” column that was published during the period of my observation was the story on Danny Shelton. This story will be analyzed in Chapter Four as its final text is directly shaped by Bell’s routines, which are revealed in the next chapter.

Finally, Bell produced a game preview story to set up the first game of the season on September 1, and game recap to describe a 21-12 win over San Diego State. The Strategic Communications Plan says that the target audience for both of these stories is media members and GoHuskies.com readers. In the game preview, the recommended tone is “Informative. Provides information about the upcoming event as well as insightful and relevant facts and figures” and the tone for the recap is “Informative. Provides information about the game. Avoids negative quotes, comments or notions about the game, season or participants” (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011, p. 4).

Bell’s game story did not avoid the negative notion that the team’s offense did not play well despite the win. However, the story did not dwell on it, either. Bell’s lead read:

SEATTLE – They said they’d be more aggressive. They said they’d fly to the ball more. They said they would force turnovers.

The Huskies did all that. And they absolutely needed to. …

“I haven’t played that bad a game in a long time. I played a terrible game,” said [quarterback Keith] Price, who also set UW’s season record with 33 touchdown passes in 2011.

“I promise you I will be better than that” (Bell, September 1, 2012, paras. 1-2 & 13-14).
The 23 stories written by Bell during the time of my observation are placed into the “Product” category of university athletic department website content, as determined by Ruihley et al. (2011). The stories are defined by the UW Athletic Communication department’s Strategic Communications plan and are executed within the definitions of the plan in most cases. The plan’s lead author, Carter Henderson, describes the stories as products, as well. However, he also makes the claim that the website on which they appear is a “neutral news source,” which undermines the notion that the stories are, in fact, products. Further, Henderson confused the intent of Bell’s position by suggesting potential audiences see Bell as an insider “writing with purple and gold glasses on” (C.S. Henderson, personal communication, August 28, 2012).

Bell’s story on Austin Seferian-Jenkins appealed to a wider audience outside of the plan-specified audience of recruits, fan base, future fans as evidenced by the fact that it was published in the Kitsap Sun. His game story also revealed the reality of a poor offensive game, despite the explicit recommendation to avoid such quotations and notions. Otherwise, Bell’s stories fell squarely within the charge of the Strategic Communications plan and presented themselves as “products” on GoHuskies.com.

This chapter examined the content of GoHuskies.com and focused on the types of stories produced, as well as the topics of the specific content published, and how these stories fit within the charges of the Athletic Communications department’s Strategic Communications Plan. The following chapter describes Bell’s routines as director of writing and provides examples of his daily actions and how these fit into the context of the study at hand.
CHAPTER 4: THE GAME

“The most important building block of both football and business is authority, and it seems to be becoming more and more important in both every day. In both realms a more and more rigid and bureaucratized hierarchy is taking shape and trying to control more and more aspects of the workers lives, both on and off the field.”


During the three weeks of fall camp and through the first week of the 2012 Washington Huskies’ season, I observed director of writing Gregg Bell in his occupational environment and paid close attention to how he moves through social and professional settings, how he establishes and moves through occupational routines, and how those routines affect the articles he produces for GoHuskies.com, as well as the messages found therein. Bell was a long-time sports journalist who spent 2005-2010 covering Seattle sports, including Washington Huskies athletic teams, before UW hired him to the director of writing position. It was a newly created position and did not exist prior to his hire. He had never received formal training in PR, but worked with public and media relations directors and managers throughout his journalism career. While working for the AP in Seattle, Bell never shied away from asking tough questions of his subjects and, when I was his colleague reporting in Seattle, I was one of many journalists who admired his professional perfectionism. That attention to detail was oddly but effectively coupled with an easygoing manner. As an AP reporter in Seattle, he worked largely out of his home and jumped to cover breaking news, or attended regularly scheduled games and press conferences. He had also taught journalism courses at UW and at the University of California at Berkeley, where he received his master’s degree in 2000. His background plays a key role in how he maneuvers through his occupational routines.
While further developing my observations and examining my ethnographic notes, I identified three themes surrounding Bell’s routines: 1.) Bell as traditional journalist, 2.) Bell as PR practitioner, and 3.) Bell as subordinate. Each of the themes had significant impacts on how he went about his workday, and on the articles he produced and how those articles fit into the editorial messaging charge of the Athletic Communications department as laid out in the Strategic Communications Plan (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011.) That charge is explicitly stated in the plan as such:

The chief aim of communications emanating from the UW department of intercollegiate athletics is to tell the stories of our student-athletes, coaches, administration and fanbase. Their stories are compelling and inspiring, and help from an unbreakable connection with our target audiences. By forming these connections, we can create a lasting brand affinity for Husky athletics and trigger increased engagement in our audience (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011, p. 3).

This chapter explores each of those themes, how they shape Bell’s routines, how those roles and routines affect the content he produces, and how that all fits into the charges of the Strategic Communications Plan.

Bell as Traditional Journalist

Bell moved about the UW athletic facilities more like an outsider than a university employee. Despite having his own office in the athletic department offices on the second floor of the Graves Building in the heart of the athletic facilities, Bell worked almost exclusively from home, as he did when he worked for the AP and is a common characteristic of a traditional media worker. After meeting with Bell for two unstructured interviews, I first observed him in a strictly occupational environment was at the kickoff news conference, which began at noon on Monday, August 6, 2012. Bell
arrived a few minutes late because he had taken his young daughter to the dentist earlier in the day. His daughter and her twin brother actually attended the news conference and sat well behind the media area waiting for Bell to finish. That Bell had flexibility with his schedule was also similar to the typical working day of a traditional reporter. He sat with the rest of the media corps before UW head football coach Steve Sarkisian. At this news conference, Sarkisian sat next to director of athletic communications Jeff Bechtold, who coordinated the event. Assistant athletic director for athletic communications Carter Henderson entered the news conference from the back with the head coach, which offered Henderson an aura of importance. During the event, Henderson stood behind the media workers as if to watch over the event. Bell wore shorts and a polo shirt, while Henderson wore a button-up shirt and tie. Bell had eight other colleagues from the athletic communications staff at the event, but he remained separate from them as they put out rosters and depth charts, arranged tables and chairs for traditional media members, took care of the media dining area, and ushered the coach in and out of the room. Bell asked one question in the same manner as the traditional journalists. For example, Sarkisian acknowledged Seattle Times reporter Bob Condotta, who then asked about the health of the team, specifically mentioning some injuries that had occurred in the spring. After Sarkisian concluded a brief answer, another reporter would ask a question without raising his or her hand. Six reporters fired off questions before Bell asked a question about the protocols of fall camp. It is the only question he asked in a news conference that lasted approximately 45 minutes. When the news conference concluded, Bell left campus to take his children home, but returned for the 3:15 p.m. practice session on his bike. (His home is only about a mile from the
athletic facilities on campus.) It was a hot day with the temperature reaching the mid-80s and the sun beating down on the unshaded practice field. Though the rest of traditional media workers were cordoned off from the field by a thin rope, Bell walked over the rope and took a drink of water from a hose attached to a cooler that the players were using. Aside from that occurrence, Bell appeared to be just another member of the press. This subtle breach of propriety was the only visible indication that Bell was not a member of the traditional press. When the practice session was concluding, Bell told Bechtold and another athletic communications employee which players he wanted to interview, just as the beat writers and other traditional media workers did. He stood in a pack with the other traditional reporters while they asked questions of Sarkisian and the players that Bechtold and his assistant brought to the side of the field for interviews.

Because Bell looked like a member of the traditional media, the players and coaches reacted to Bell in nearly the exact same manner as they reacted to beat writers and other media members. There were no tangible differences between Bell and the other reporters when it came to the interviews Bell conducted. He used a notebook and a digital recorder. The players answered his questions, but did not address him – or any of the media members – by their first or last names that I witnessed. Bell, along with the other media members, conducted interviews while standing on the practice field at the end of designated practice sessions. Sometimes they conducted these interviews in packs, such as when Sarkisian would address them all at the same time. Or, Bell and the other reporters would take a player or assistant coach away from other reporters to talk away from the pack. Bell appeared to get no special treatment. He was not privy to players’ contact information in order to contact them at a time other than when
traditional media members had access to them. He also had no access to the coaches outside of the designated interview times after practice sessions. If Bell did not get on his bicycle and ride home to write his story – which he typically did – he did not go to his office in the athletic department to write. Rather, he joined the beat writers in the media workroom located in the basement of Hec Edmundson Pavilion, the basketball arena adjacent to the practice field.

Figure 3. Gregg Bell (back center, sunglasses on head) stands with members of the traditional media as they interview head coach Steve Sarkisian (facing the pack). Athletic director Scott Woodward looks on (back right, hands in pocket.) Source: Photo by Molly Yanity

His superiors did not shape these routines. Rather, they were born out of the routines he had when he worked at the AP. Bell said:
I still consider myself a journalist. I do journalism. I have to understand both journalism and PR. I side to journalism, so they have to beat the PR stuff over my head, but I got home last night and wrote two stories that were published for an audience to read – that’s journalism (personal communication, August 15, 2012).

In many instances, Bell is even treated like a member of the traditional media by his own department. For example, On August 14, the Athletic Communications office sent out a news release to traditional media outlets that two players had been kicked off the team. This information originated with coach Steve Sarkisian. Someone in the football office relayed the information to Henderson, who passed it along to Bechtold, who wrote the release. Bell did not see the release, but Bechtold informed him of the roster move at practice. In other words, Bell learned that information at about the same time the traditional reporters learned it. This news could be found in the 34th paragraph of Bell’s August 16 story on GoHuskies.com. The players removed from the roster were not high profile players and did not garner much attention in the traditional media outlets, either. Sarkisian refused to elaborate on the expulsions, and was not pressed by either traditional reporters or Bell. As Bell walked into practice two days later on August 17, he noticed a player wearing one of the expelled player’s jersey numbers. He asked Bechtold, “Who is the new No. 82?” Bell recalled: “It was the same guy that had been kicked off the team. They [the expelled players] had been reinstated. No one told me” (personal communication, August 18, 2012). When a newspaper reporter asked Sarkisian after practice what had happened with the expulsion and subsequent reinstatement, the coach answered, “It felt like the right thing to do.” The quote ended up in both the Seattle Times’s report, and in Bell’s August 17 article on GoHuskies.com. Neither Bell nor any of the other reporters pressed Sarkisian for details, and this was all
that was reported. As noted in the previous chapter, this happened often that quotations from Sarkisian would end up in both traditional media reports and in the articles of GoHuskies.com. That is because, when Sarkisian spoke, he did it to a pack of traditional reporters that also included Bell. The topic of the lead football story on GoHuskies.com and the Seattle Times was the same four times during my four-week observation period. Bell never asked coaches and players about injuries, but players’ health was always a popular topic for the traditional media members. Still, when Sarkisian answered the questions – and he did not always do so thoroughly – the information would appear in the traditional media outlets’ reports, as well as a three-dot item in the footer of Bell’s articles, as noted in the previous chapter. Sarkisian went to great effort to keep the traditional media at arm’s length. With Bell seemingly situated with the traditional media, he, too, was kept at a distance.

The difference in the tone of the content between the Bell’s articles and those published in the traditional media outlets was so slight that it was often difficult to distinguish. Given the fact that Bell was attempting to follow the charge of a detailed strategic communications plan, this is a pointed failing of the traditional media. This inability or, perhaps, this reluctance to perform a critical role as an outside observer was obvious on the part of the traditional media. This will be examined further in Chapter Five as it fits into the theoretical conception of the Sport/Media Complex, as introduced by Jhally (1984) in Chapter One. The Sport/Media Complex insists upon the control of the spectacle and, inherent to this control is the prioritization of material interests over human interests (Billings & Butterworth, 2012).
Bell’s training and experience as a journalist dictate some of his routines, as well. For example, since he does, in fact, have a limited amount of access on road games that the traditional media do not have, he attempts to showcase that in order to provide his audience with something unique. Since he travels with the football team to away games, he joins the team as it goes to pre-game “walkthroughs” – these are times when the players and coaches go to the visiting stadium, typically the day before a game, to familiarize themselves with the locker rooms and such. Bell uses the dateline of the visiting city and writes something about the stadium or the walkthrough itself, he said, because this offers readers of his stories something the other media outlets will not have as they do not have that access. It is something in which Bell takes pride.

Bell attempts to maintain journalistic integrity to an extent, as well. One small example is that while he does not elaborate on injuries or suspensions, he does not ignore them outright, either, as shown in previous examples. This appears to be his journalistic instincts at play; he simply cannot ignore it. Further, as shown in the content of his game story in Chapter Three, he pointed out that the Huskies’ offense struggled during most of the team’s season-opening win. Though it is explicitly outlined in the Strategic Communications Plan to avoid such a narrative, Bell did not even seem to realize he had gone beyond the suggested tone – he simply wrote about what he saw taking place on the field. However, he has also felt the pressure of sticking to that plan. For example, early in Bell’s tenure at UW in 2010, the football team lost an early-season game to the University of Nebraska in unimpressive fashion. The final score was 51-26 in Nebraska’s favor. Bell wrote about the game as a learning experience. The lead of his game story read: “Coach Steve Sarkisian has already sent the message. And his Huskies
are already absorbing it” (Bell, 2010). Bell pointed this story out to me; I had not read it as it was outside of the timeframe of my August 2012 fieldwork. He said this game story made him feel like he “lost my first chunk of credibility” as a journalist because of the positive tone he used in what was clearly a negative performance by the UW football team (personal communication, August 18, 2012). Thus, while I saw him use his instincts as a traditional journalist to tell the story of the September 1, 2012 game, Bell still understood that he could not go too far, as evidenced by the game story from 2010.

Finally, Bell harbors another intrinsic characteristic of a strong traditional journalist – he has a desire to break news. Since GoHuskies.com has branded itself – on its own website – as “The most complete destination for Husky news, straight from the source,” Bell wants to live up to that. However, the Athletic Communications staff missed an opportunity to break news during my observation period and Bell was clearly frustrated. On the morning of August 7, just my second day of observation, ESPNChicago announced on its Twitter feed that the Huskies football team would travel to Chicago to play the University of Illinois at Soldier Field, the home stadium of the National Football League’s Chicago Bears in 2013. ESPN.com’s Pac-12 blogger followed up with a short story on ESPN.com before GoHuskies.com had the news on its site. Bell described how the information moved through channels in the Athletic Communications department:

We knew about this on Wednesday [August 1]. Carter [Henderson] said it was up to Illinois to release it. I vetted it for the messaging channel, wrote it up and was told [by Henderson] that it would run that day or the next day. Scott [Woodward, athletic director] just wants me to make up quotes on his behalf, run it by him or by his secretary. I did that. So, Wednesday it was drop everything and do it. Then, nothing. Someone at Illinois blabbed it. Well, then, this morning
[another source broke it.] It’s just silly to get beat on your own story (G. Bell, personal communication, August 7).

Bell said he expressed this sentiment to associate athletic director O.D. Vincent and to Henderson that day without much of a response. He told me after his discussions with Vincent and Henderson:

It’s just bureaucratic stuff at this point. They want to be “the source.” It says it on the website. Are we going to be the first source, or are we playing this bureaucratic game? I’m not willing to cut it both ways. There are too many layers. We can’t be first with all of them (G. Bell, personal communication, August 7).

The reality, however, is that Bell has to work through the layers. These layers of bureaucracy – of who gets to say what and when – shape his routine and greatly influence what is published on the website. And, what is not on the site is much breaking news. Henderson explains this:

By definition we are going to be the authority on it whether we break it ourselves, or if I pick up the phone and call Bob Condotta [of the Seattle Times.] However it’s broken, it comes from us. (laughs) It’s always important to look through that lens on it.

You know, quite honestly, I’m in a tough spot. I’m expected to maintain great relationships with our local/regional/national media partners, and I’m also expected – now that we’ve got this new initiative in our director of writing position, even our social [media tools] and everything else – to own some of our news when it’s appropriate. And balancing those two is the trick because it’d be easy to do one or the other (C.S. Henderson, personal communication, August 28, 2012).

Bell and Henderson, in separate interviews, described to me an instance when controlling a breaking-news type of event backfired on the Athletic Communications staff. The website hosted a feature that counted down the time to a major scheduling announcement. When the countdown expired, it was revealed on GoHuskies.com – first and exclusively – that the first football game in the newly renovated Husky Stadium in
2013 would be against Boise State University. Fans were underwhelmed when they went to the site for this news. Bell and Henderson had different interpretations of the event. Henderson’s account went as follows:

We were super excited about it. At the time, [Boise State] was a top-10 opponent. What they’ve done recently? They’re silly good. You look what they’ve done regionally, teams we already play – it’s our best opponent. It also meant we weren’t going to have to travel there. So, it showed that our head coach said, “I’m not worried about it, we’ll play whoever, whenever, wherever.” So, we thought that there was a lot of really good messaging around that. …

So, this was the first time we said, “Gregg, get your stuff in order, this is what we’re going to do.” There’s a release planned. We really drummed it up a lot socially and with our own media programs where we’d say, “Major scheduling news announcement this afternoon.” It turned out some of that messaging gave people the idea we were going to bring out [defending national champion] Alabama, or Florida. We kind of shot [face level] and people’s expectations were [over his head], and we kind of delivered here [chest level]. … People thought that it was over-messaged a little bit, which certainly wasn’t Gregg’s fault because that was the brief we gave him and it was Sark’s language and everything. But, when we’re in instances like that, sometimes it’s hit or miss.

We’ve found that it’s hard for people to view us as a neutral outlet even if we are, even if Gregg has reported everything down the T and treated it as if he were entirely neutral. I don’t know that we’re ever going to get there (C.S. Henderson, personal communication, August 28, 2012).

Bell told me that he anticipated the audiences’ disappointment early in the process because he understood that Huskies’ fans do not consider Boise State to be a top-tier opponent. He said:

We really blew it up, and it was [just] Boise State. No one asked Jeff or I how we thought it would go, you know, guys who have been here and understand that. I was just told to write a press release. So, we have this countdown, do this whole thing [and] it was announced and I felt like a complete schmuck. The fans here don’t think of Boise State as worthy of a great announcement. It didn’t work well. We had one chance to show how this system was going to work and the content was a dud. It was bad, the comments and tweets we got. Fans weren’t impressed (G. Bell, personal communication, August 28, 2012).
When Bell tries to operate as a traditional journalist, he attempts to be fair and balanced, and he wants to break news and be competitive against traditional news outlets. But this role – despite it fitting well with Bell’s background and strengths – does not fit into either the Strategic Communications Plan, or into the premises of PR theory. Rather, this role as traditional journalist moves in the opposite direction of those. This is an obvious source of frustration for Bell. According to both Bell and athletic director Scott Woodward, Bell’s role was not well defined when he took the job in 2010. While he was not brought in to compete with the traditional media, Woodward said, Bell was, however, hired primarily to tell stories.

There’s a lot of stuff being written about us, but we aren’t controlling that message. And sometimes, it was wrong. So I was thinking, let’s get a fair, objective journalist like Gregg Bell, who is in a unique situation, and let’s talk about the University of Washington. But I’m sure the cynical traditional media will say this is propaganda, government-controlled spin. That’s a point there, but no, this is a fresh, new look. Here’s a guy that’s well respected in the business, writes well, and who is going to tell the other side of the story – human interest things that matter to fans and to people that aren’t getting written about in the traditional media. The traditional media is worried about who is injured, and who gotcha, and who is winning and losing. No, there are some great stories about our incredible 600 student-athletes who are doing amazing things and we want to talk about it (S. Woodward, personal communication, August 30, 2012).

Bell said he still does not have an explicit job description and, three years after being hired, admits he acts like a journalist until he bumps “into walls to try to figure it out.” (personal communication, August 29, 2012). He continued:

I get chewed out for this and for that. OK, I guess I can’t do that. But how do you do this and not my edge? There has to be some journalistic integrity. I thought I’d be a reporter and they’d adjust. I’m the one constantly adjusting.” (Bell, G., personal communication, August 29, 2012).

That adjustment is explored in the next part of this study.
Bell as PR Practitioner

The walls against which Bell bumps are the constraints of public relations. In PR, as stated in Chapter One, is designed in part to “foster desirable relationships between the sport organization and those key publics” (Stoldt, Dittmore & Branvold, 2006, p. 2). The relationship, of course, is the connection Marx describes from production, distribution, exchange, and consumption (Marx, 1903). In this instance, the PR role is to create stories for an audience to read on GoHuskies.com, inspire enough fervor to convince the audience to buy tickets or donate money, and then to consume the spectacle. In some cases, Bell moves through these walls without incident. For example, when he is tasked with assignments that deal specifically with donors and season-ticket holders, the assignment is clear in its purpose. For example, he writes letters that are signed by Woodward or Sarkisian that promote fundraising efforts and are published in brochures, or that encourage season-ticket renewals and are published in collateral. These letters are targeted at “stakeholders,” as defined by Freeman’s Stakeholder Theory (1984), and they are transparent in their purpose of making that connection for consumption. He has also written articles for the alumni magazine Dawgs Digest and understands that this magazine is specifically used to make alumni feel good about their alma mater in the hopes that they will donate to the athletic department.

There are other walls, however, into which Bell has crashed with frustration. This is much like traditional reporters dealing with flak. As Herman and Chomsky wrote, flak can come in the form of explicit strong-arming, or as powerful suggestions or reactions (1988). Asking about injuries was one of these suggestions for Bell. During his first football season on the job, he asked Sarkisian about injuries after which he was
asked by Henderson not to do it, and his routine changed – he never asked again, he said. Now, he lets the other reporters ask and reports minimally about injuries to football players.

Bell hit another wall, he told me, when he was attempting to highlight some of the “backstage access” he got after a loss at Oregon State University in November 2011. Bell travels with the team, so he went to the post-game interview sessions with the traditional reporters after the game to conduct interviews, but left from the locker room to go to the team bus – a vantage point other reporters did not have. He wrote of the loss:

Keith Price was dragging his leg, vowing to start next week’s Apple Cup. Cort Dennison was shaking his head as he walked alone to the team bus, saying “coaches can only do so much. We need to rise up as players.” And Nick Montana was in tears (Bell, 2011).

The lead of this story taught Bell a lesson about PR. He said:

I wrote about it and [Sarkisian] called and asked Carter whose side I was on and said I violated the inner sanctum. I called [Sarkisian] and said I was sorry, but that I just wanted to show the emotions of the kids and show how serious they were about winning. He said, “You don’t want the kids wondering whose side you’re on,” (G. Bell, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

However, the athletes do not seem to wonder at all. From my observational standpoint, Bell’s occupational routines fall so closely in line with those of the traditional media members, it means that the football players see him as a traditional reporter. Bell sees this as a frustrating disadvantage when he is trying to serve the PR function. He explained:

I have no opportunity to get in front of the team and tell them what I’m doing. And that’s weird. They’ll see me on the [team] plane, or at 10 a.m. in the hotel hallway and I can tell by the look on their faces – they wonder what I’m doing there” (G. Bell, personal communication, August 18, 2012).
With the players unaware of Bell’s function as PR practitioner, Bell is left to define his stories and their quotations for the PR function, even when it goes against his journalistic instincts. Again, as stated in the Strategic Communications Plan, this function is:

... to tell the stories of our student-athletes, coaches, administration and fanbase... and help form an unbreakable connection with our target audience. By forming these connections, we can create a lasting brand affinity for Husky athletics and trigger increased engagement in our audience (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011, p. 3).

Sarkisian’s reaction to his Oregon State game story showed Bell that tears after a loss do not help to form unbreakable connections with or trigger engagement in the stakeholders. Bell’s journalistic integrity bumped up against the coach’s communications goal, as well as the goals laid out in the Strategic Communications Plan. They also force Bell into a strict PR role. However, given that the football players see him as a traditional journalist, Bell’s true role is one lacking definition and a role that is mired in confusion.

Bell as Subordinate

Bell’s simultaneous routine of balancing his journalistic instincts, the “job” of being a journalist, and the “job” of being PR practitioner has placed him firmly into a role of subordination guided by bureaucracy. I detailed the hierarchy of the athletics department and of the Athletic Communications staff in Chapter Two, but as a refresher, Bell reports to senior associate athletic director O.D. Vincent, then to athletic director Scott Woodward. Carter Henderson was hired as director of public relations shortly after Bell’s hire in 2010, but Henderson has since been promoted to assistant athletic director
of athletic communications. This promotion technically moved Henderson above Bell on the hierarchical list.

However, given the closed structure within the athletic department, I was surprised to learn that it was not, in fact, Woodward, who sat at the top of the hierarchy. Despite having no experience in strategic communications, PR, or journalism, the person at the top is, in fact, head football coach Steve Sarkisian. Sarkisian’s reactions and directives shape nearly all of Bell’s routines. Henderson said of this:

Sometimes [Sarkisian] will want Gregg to write something, or to not write something. We try to balance all of those things. . . . While [Sarkisian] is a football coach, he is also a [chief executive officer] of sorts. In that role, you manage things like messaging, recruiting. I don’t know comparatively how involved another head coach wants to be with all that, but with our guy, I think that’s one of the things that makes him great. He certainly isn’t trained in that, but he has a pretty good feel for what he wants in that area and it has proven to be pretty successful in the recruiting domain (personal communication, August 28, 2012.)

As discussed in Chapter Three, during my observation period, Bell researched and wrote a story about sophomore defensive tackle Danny Shelton and wanted to publish it on GoHuskies.com as his weekly “Unleashed” feature. A year and a half earlier, Shelton had witnessed the murder of his brother after a street fight. The killer was not prosecuted because the district attorney determined it to be a case of self-defense. The police report, though public record, had not been discussed in traditional media outlets. Thus, the fact that Shelton himself had been involved in the fight went unreported. Bell suggested that this incident was a turning point in the young man’s life because he went on to accept a football scholarship, earn all-academic honors, and had been to that point a two-year starter. It was to be the crux of the story he wanted to write for GoHuskies.com. On August 15, Bell interviewed Sarkisian, asking him questions
about Shelton. Since Bell is treated more like a member of the traditional media instead of as an athletic department staffer, this exchange took place just off the practice field after Sarkisian fielded questions in his post-practice media session. Before this exchange took place, Bell lamented:

Only in my job does this happen. I wrote the story last night and when I saw the police report, I wondered about it. So, I’ll pull [Sarkisian] out tonight and lead in with this and ask his permission. It’s a trust thing and I’m trying to build his trust. I may blow the column, but gain trust. Or, I gain trust and it’s a great column (personal communication, August 15, 2012.)

The exchange between Bell and Sarkisian was uncomfortable, but Bell asked positive questions about Sarkisian being at the hospital with Shelton and his family as one brother had died and another was injured. Finally, Bell asked Sarkisian if he thought it sounded like a good story. Sarkisian said yes, but was rushed and impatient. Bell wrote the story that night and emailed it to Sarkisian for his approval. The next day, Sarkisian did his typical post-practice session and said nothing to Bell about the story.

On August 18, Bell still had heard nothing about the story from the head coach. After a scrimmage, which brought big donors and local celebrities like former Guns ‘N Roses bassist Duff McKagan to practice, Bell decided to ask Sarkisian about the story. He waited until the traditional reporters were finished asking questions and followed Sarkisian a few yards off the field before stopping the coach. The exchange was immediately awkward and, from my vantage point, very much looked like Bell was asking his father if he could use the car for a date. Bell said, “I think this could be a turning-point type of story.” Sarkisian said, “Yeah, yeah,” and Bell shrugged and offered to send it him again before the coach hurried away. Bell was clearly humiliated by the condescension. He did not hear back on the story until August 22 – a week after he
wanted to run it. But instead of hearing from Sarkisian, Bell heard from the coach’s assistant, Cheryl Taplin, via email. The email read: “Gregg, Sark wants you to hold off on the article for now. Thanks, Cheryl Taplin” (personal communication, August 22, 2012). Bell wrote in an email to me that evening, “Here’s all you need to know about my relationship with the football coach” (personal communication, August 22, 2012).

What this exchange showed was that Bell was not simply a subordinate to Sarkisian, he was also placed beneath anyone in the football office, including Taplin and director of football operations Jared Blank, who produces and publishes Sarkisian’s tweets, his blog, and updates CoachSark.com, which is yet another attempt at branding for yet another platform. (CoachSark.com is linked from GoHuskies.com.)

This was not the first time Bell bumped his head against the hierarchy of the football office. Bell relayed to me a story from the final game of the 2011 season, the Alamo Bowl in San Antonio, Texas where the Huskies were to face Baylor (personal communication, August 7, 2012). Baylor’s star player, Robert Griffin III, was named the most valuable player in college football when he won the Heisman Trophy shortly before facing UW. Sarkisian was concerned how Bell would characterize the Huskies defensive unit, which had struggled through most of the season. So, Sarkisian had Bell send his game preview to Blank before he published it on GoHuskies.com. Bell told me he was in his hotel room in San Antonio when Blank called him. Blank, with Sarkisian speaking over his shoulder, went through the story line by line. They changed words, edited entire sentences, and made suggestions, Bell said (personal communication, August 7, 2012). Bell was flabbergasted – the football coach had become his editor. Bell
had not experienced this in his relationships with other coaches at UW, he said. But, he also knows that football is an entity all its own. He said:

“The football programs are so separate. Just look at the staffs – they’re seven times bigger and they generate all the money. They have no master, not even the AD. The tail wags the dog. And think about it… this is Sark’s first head coaching job” (personal communication, August 16, 2012).

Almost two weeks after Bell had initially approached Sarkisian about the Shelton story, he asked the coach for a third time about it. Bell said that Sarkisian, in a curt tone, said: “Why don’t you just summarize [the police report]? … [Otherwise] it will make people think we bring criminals into this program” (personal communication, August 28, 2012). That night, Bell reworked his story. I read the original and also saw the new version. He took out the details of Shelton pistol-whipping the man who shot his brother. He removed other details about what escalated the fight to murder, as well. Bell submitted the revision to Sarkisian and Henderson. During the afternoon practice session, Bell received an email from Henderson on his iPhone. Bell turned to me and said, “Steve wants Scott to read it.” Bell’s patience seemed to have run out as he realized that the story had been passed on to yet another set of eyes – those of the athletic director. But, Woodward – the athletic director – attended every practice session, so Bell staked him out. Woodward’s typical vantage point at practices was on the field of play, so Bell left the proximity of the traditional reporters and walked out on to the field. (This was the only time I saw him do this.) Woodward read the story from Bell’s iPhone. After practice, Bell chased down Woodward, who said, “I have no problem with it.” Bell asked, “What were the issues with the original?” Woodward simply said, “Too rough.”

The Danny Shelton story ran on GoHuskies.com on August 29, 2012 – more than two
weeks after Bell originally submitted it for publication. Bell went through three versions
of the story and 15 days before it reached his audience. The original story used details
from the police report and charging documents. Bell was specific about what the shooter
was going through – seeing six large Samoans approaching his house yelling. The
original version, which Bell shared with me in an August 22 email, included the
following:

According to an Auburn Police Department report and the Auburn Reporter
newspaper, Tui rounded up his brothers, some cousins and a friend after he got
jumped, and those six went to Woods’ apartment looking for him.

According to the police report, charging documents and the Auburn Reporter,
Woods saw the six Samoans approaching and went into his apartment to retrieve
a gun while his mother and sister stayed out front keeping the Shelton brothers
and cousins outside. Woods returned to the front and shot Tui through his torso,
narrowly missing his heart. When Skeevie responded by lunging for Woods,
Woods shot him in the neck.

He then tried to shoot Danny. But the gun jammed.

With one of his brothers dying and another shot in the chest feet away from him,
Danny began pounding on the gunman. The melee ended when Woods’ mother
and sister pepper sprayed Danny, according to the report (Bell, G., email
communication, August 22, 2012).

These details made the published story in muted, not explicit terms. The
published version read as follows:

According to a report by the Auburn Police Department, the brothers were at an
apartment following a street fight involving Danny’s oldest brother Gaston,
whom they call “Tui.” Tui then rounded up his brothers, some cousins and a
friend and sought retribution.

They were met at the apartment not only with resistance, but a gun. Tui was shot
through his torso, narrowly missing his heart. Skeevie was mortally wounded in
the neck.
Then – mercifully, miraculously, whatever – the gunman’s weapon jammed. With one of his brothers dying and another shot in the chest feet away from him, Danny jumped the shooter.

Pepper spray ended the melee, but not the memory (Bell, August 29, 2012).

Both versions of the story included how Sarkisian went to the hospital and comforted Shelton and his family. Both versions included an entire section about Sarkisian’s emotional generosity toward Shelton and described how the coach became a “father figure” to the young man the night of the shooting. It also described how Shelton felt that he became “a Husky for life” that evening.

Bell’s instincts as a traditional journalist led him to the police report and charging papers in the first place. Those instincts drove him to put those details on paper. The PR practitioner in him led him to the glowing assessment of the coach. It was the role of subordinate, however, that forced Bell to wait, edit, downplay the violent details altogether, and rewrite.

Bell’s weekly column, “Unleashed,” is anything but. Still, it attracted about 16,000 viewers over the course of the week after it was published. That is a statistic that may prove that UW’s approach to this content is successful. However, as Henderson said in our interview, measuring how that web traffic relates to the bottom line is impossible to track. It would be difficult to prove that Bell’s readers buy tickets or merchandise, that they donate, or that they are recruits who want to come for a campus visit or choose to attend the university and play for the Huskies. Thus, it would be difficult to measure the success of Bell’s messaging, a research question that is outside the scope of this dissertation. However, nearly 16,000 unique visitors did look at Bell’s feel-good feature on tight end Austin Seferian-Jenkins and his “date” with a sick girl in a
hospital room days before she died. During October 2011, web stats revealed that 101,685 unique visitors looked at football-related stories on GoHuskies.com, (this does not include the football homepage, statistics – just original content.) As a comparison, stats provided to me by the Seattle Times showed that SeattleTimes.com drew roughly that many visitors per week during October 2011. But the niched content of GoHuskies.com was never intended to compete with the traditional media, athletics director Scott Woodward said (personal communication, August 30, 2012). The content on GoHuskies.com is produced to serve a different purpose – to use stories to engage stakeholders. It clearly did this.

Bell has adopted routines and roles as a traditional journalist, a PR practitioner, and a subordinate, conflicting roles that make achieving a clear message somewhat difficult, as this chapter has shown. These roles and routines, however, do create stories that look and feel like the product of a traditional journalist, but serve the purpose of controlling the spectacle that is the football program. The effects of this hierarchy are explored in the Chapter Five. Controlling the sport spectacle accumulates more wealth, as Jhally (1984) noted in Chapter One, for the UW athletic department. Thus, the stories on GoHuskies.com themselves become part of the organization of labor, and the logic of that organization insists that “the human interests of those involved become secondary to the material interests of those who run” the Washington Huskies (Billings & Butterworth, 2012, p. 257). The following chapter details which human interests become secondary to material interests. In other words, there are real winners and losers in this game.
“...the real outrage is not that students are getting illegally paid or recruited, it’s that two of the noble principles on which the NCAA justifies its existence—‘amateurism’ and the ‘student-athlete’—are cynical hoaxes, legalistic confections propagated by the university so they can exploit the skills and fame of young athletes.”


Sports were once a diversion for those who participated in them. Today, it is a capitalistic endeavor, a social relation of exploitation. The events and teams in big-time and professional sports have “become vehicles to promote strategies of growth, investment, capital accumulation, global and regional positioning for further capital accumulation” (Nauright in Nauright & Schimmel, 2005, p. 209). Just as Marx suggested, this facilitates a social order in which there are the exploiters and the exploited, or winners and losers. Remember from the introduction, sport is powerful. This order of power has created a landscape in college football that is filled with scandal, corruption, and exploitation. This chapter details the social order of college football – the winners and losers that exist in its cultural hegemony and the ills that have fallen on it.

At the University of Washington in August 2012, a football team prepared for its season in the shadows of a $250 million stadium renovation. A head football coach, who is the state’s highest paid public employee, held court over the preparations. The person who is symbolically at the top of the occupational flowchart here is the athletic director, and he moved about the field of play without restriction, overseeing the program’s moneymaker. Still, he is careful not to step on the toes of the head football coach. The area’s rich and powerful gathered to watch the preparations – one day it was Rock and
Roll Hall of Fame member Duff McKagan, formerly of the band Guns ‘N Roses.
Another day it was Emerald Downs horse racing track founder Ron Crockett. A group of predominantly white men reported on the preparations, and a staff was organized to promote the preparations. This promotion is explicitly outlined in a 35-page Strategic Communications Plan. It calls for specific messaging goals and editorial structures.

So, where exactly is the power situated on this field? And how do the articles on GoHuskies.com serve as tools to concentrate the control of the production of the spectacle to secure and expand that power? This chapter answers these questions by explaining who holds the power, or, who the winners in this high-stakes game are. Conversely, it also describes who the losers are, while showing how the articles on GoHuskies.com enforce or reinforce what Nauright describes as the mythological rhetoric of “purity, fair play and expanding opportunities” (Nauright in Nauright & Schimmel, 2005, p. 208).

The Winners

It could be argued that the University of Washington itself is the biggest winner as it reaps financial benefits from its highly profitable athletic department and political benefits from its esteem, magnitude, and wealth. One could make a case that Steve Sarkisian, the head football coach, is the biggest winner as he is the most powerful person in the athletic department, earning more than $2.5 million per year and wielding more influence than his supposed superior, athletic director Scott Woodward. Another argument could be made that big-money boosters are the winners in this game as their gifts create tangible connections and associations with the spectacle of UW football.
However, I contend that they are all big winners in this high-stakes game of mediated college football, which make the cultural hegemony of college football the real winner. This was partially revealed in this study’s introduction when it quoted Hoch, who was leaning on the ideals of Marxist capitalism, and wrote: “[an American] can be drugged out of taking any action that might upset the present status quo, and also drugged in a most efficient way into accepting the values and world view of the present status quo” (1972, p. 22). The athletic department provides a sizeable machine to maintain the status quo, and Gregg Bell’s stories on GoHuskies.com are a significant instrument in that machine. When, as director of writing, Bell is operating within two of the roles I identified, – as a PR practitioner and a subordinate – his stories propagate the rhetoric of “purity, fair play and expanding opportunities” (Nauright in Nauright & Schimmel, 2005, p. 208). His stories showcase the positives of overcoming injury – even when a player has yet to overcome the injury (as described in the story of Deontae Cooper, who insisted he will eventually play for the Huskies after a third torn ligament), and downplay the negative – even when the negative adds honest and critical detail (as described in the story of Danny Shelton, whose brother’s murderer was not charged because Shelton was part of a group intimidating the man). These narratives do, in fact, achieve the goals of UW’s Strategic Communications Plan. They do, in fact, “increase [the] level of user’s engagement by fostering a greater sense of brand affinity” (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011, p. 1). While the return on investment is difficult to measure, despite a strong tally of unique visitors to certain stories, marketing success can be measured by the facts that private donations, attendance, and profit are strong:
• Private donors gave $50 million from 2010 to 2012 to pay for the $250 million Husky Stadium renovation. (Thirty-year bonds are covering the rest.)

• More than 52,742 rabid fans were in attendance at the 2012 season-opening game at the team’s temporary home CenturyLink Stadium, home to the NFL’s Seattle Seahawks. This is less than the 70,000 the newly-renovated Husky Stadium will hold, but still a strong opener against the low-profile San Diego State.

• The athletic department brought in nearly $34 million in 2009-10 in ticket and merchandise sales, as well as media rights contracts, bowl money, and more (Dosh, 2011).

By hiring a professional journalist with a keen sense of integrity in Bell, UW took a calculated risk. Clearly, athletic director Scott Woodward and associate athletic director O.D. Vincent wanted to tap into Bell’s award-winning ability to craft a story. There are several former journalists working for athletic departments across the country, but Bell is the only one I could find with the specific title “Director of Writing,” and who enjoys routines that allow him to move about the athletic department largely as he would have as a traditional reporter. However, as indicated in Chapter Four, Bell’s role as traditional journalist is just one of three key roles. The others test his journalistic integrity, influence his content, and force him into roles as PR practitioner and subordinate.

Bell’s stories help to create fervor among fans and lull fans into accepting college football as it is. Hence, the stories are part of the opiate. They help to create and
to maintain a connection between the “stakeholders” – donors, season-ticket holders, those who “engage” with the program, as described by assistant athletic director Carter Henderson – and the program itself.

But there is a problem with this, and that is that college football is sick.

In his scathing indictment of the NCAA, “The Shame of College Sports,” Pulitzer Prize-winning author Taylor Branch reveals this illness. He outlines the exploitation of athletes and details legal cases, scandals, corruption, a “pretense of concern for academic integrity,” a “plantation mentality,” and “clear abuse by the collective power of the schools and all their conferences under the NCAA umbrella—‘a most effective cartel’” (Branch, 2011, p. 25). Countless books have been written over the last 25 years to describe this illness, as well, which has only become graver and graver. From Rick Telander’s “The Hundred Yard Lie” to Mark Yost’s “Varsity Green,” from “Beer and Circus” by Murray Sperber to “Scoreboard, Baby” by Seattle Times reporters Ken Armstrong and Nick Perry, these books offer example after example of a broken system, one in which “amateurism” is translated to “hypocrisy” as the athletes play for free while the winners I identify reap power and money. Further, these books detail, not anomalies, but regularities of corruption, greed, and crime in big-time college sports. These four books offer a range of dire situations. Respectively, they detail the lies embedded in the positive narratives of big-time college football, the finances – and corrupt means to obtain them – of college sports, the inability to compatibly marry commercialized sports to the mission of the American academy, and stories of crime and institutional complicity from our very own Washington Huskies of the late 1990s and early 2000s.
Branch’s groundbreaking article and all these books were published before the biggest scandal in college sports history was to be uncovered. In November 2011, a Pennsylvania grand jury indicted former Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky on more than 50 counts of child sex abuse involving 10 boys spanning 15 years with some of the assaults taking place in the Penn State football locker room. Penn State athletic director Tim Curley and vice president Gary Schultz were also charged with lying to the grand jury about what they knew of the abuse. The Board of Trustees fired president Graham Spanier. Then it shocked the college football world when it fired Penn State’s Hall of Fame football coach Joe Paterno – the winningest coach in college football history – in December 2011 for not reporting what he may have known about the rapes to authorities. Paterno maintained his innocence and ignorance until his death January 22. On June 22, 2012, a jury convicted Sandusky of 45 counts of sexually assaulting 10 minors. On July 12, former Federal Bureau of Investigations director Louis Freeh, who had been hired by Penn State to lead a team to conduct an internal audit of the situation, submitted a report. Among the findings of the “Freeh Report” were that Spanier, Schultz, Curley, and Paterno all had knowledge of Sandusky’s crimes and did nothing with that knowledge. “These men concealed Sandusky’s activities from the Board of Trustees, the University community and authorities,” the report read (Freeh, 2012, p. 14). Further, the report noted that the audit “finds that it is more reasonable to conclude that, in order to avoid the consequences of bad publicity, the most powerful leaders at the University – Spanier, Schultz, Paterno and Curley – repeatedly concealed critical facts relating to Sandusky’s child abuse…” (Freeh, 2012, p. 16). In other words, the most powerful leaders at the
university wanted to maintain the status quo. They were winners in this cultural hegemony – men wielding political and economic power. Shattering the brand affinity of Penn State football could crumble the entire system as they knew it and render them losers.

Producing fervor-inducing articles and protecting pedophiles are clearly not comparable actions. However, both actions do have a glaring similarity in this context – they are both employed to protect the cultural hegemony of college football. They both maintain the status quo. In the Penn State case, it is clear to see how “the human interests of those involved become secondary to the material interests of those who run sports” (Billings & Butterworth, 2012, p. 257). For the four most powerful men at Penn State, maintaining the positive brand affinity was more important than protecting children from a serial pedophile. Of course, I believe that there were other factors at work in their convenient ignoring of the facts – like the disbelief that a long-time friend and colleague could be capable of such behavior. But I believe – and the Freeh Report confirms this to a large extent – that the fear of bad publicity, of damaging the brand of Penn State football, and of a diminished bottom line played primary roles in their silence and congruent cover-up.

So, how does UW place the material interests over the human interests?

Branch, a civil rights historian, writes:

I have come to believe that sentiment blinds us to what’s before our eyes. Big-time college sports are fully commercialized. Billions of dollars flow through them each year. The NCAA makes money, and enables universities and corporations to make money, from the unpaid labor of young athletes.

Slavery analogies should be used carefully. College athletes are not slaves. Yet to survey the scene—corporations and universities enriching themselves on the
backs of uncompensated young men, whose status as “student-athlete” deprives them of the right to due process guaranteed by the Constitution—is to catch an unmistakable whiff of the plantation. Perhaps a more apt metaphor is colonialism: college sports, as overseen by the NCAA, is a system imposed by well-meaning paternalists and rationalized with hoary sentiments about caring for the well-being of the colonized. But is, nonetheless, unjust (2011, p. 5).

The UW athletic department places the material interests over the human interests by doing all it can to ensure that its “stakeholders” – its fans – fail to see the unjustness. Part of the machinery that does this is Bell and his stories. The athletic department hired Bell, who was respected upon his arrival because of his journalistic flair, to produce feel-good stories that have the ability to blur the sightlines of the fans. When this happens, the fans become intoxicated by Hoch’s version of Marx’s opiate and the status quo wins. When the Athletic Communications staff shapes professional routines to its marketing goals and to the whims of a football coach, and puts forth articles with the number one goal of maintaining brand affinity, the cultural hegemony of big-time college football wins.

The University of Washington, its athletic department, its boosters, Steve Sarkisian, and the Sports/Media Complex are all winners in this game, too—but only because they are embedded in the cultural hegemony of big-time college football.

In Branch’s article, he explains why the academic arm of universities bows to the athletic arm:

Educators are in thrall to their athletic departments because of these television riches and because they respect the political furies that can burst from a locker room. “There’s fear” [former president of North Carolina’s university system William Friday] told me when I visited him on the University of North Carolina campus in Chapel Hill last fall. As we spoke, two giant construction cranes towered nearby over the university’s Kenan Stadium, working on the latest $77 million renovation. … Friday insisted that for the networks, paying huge sums to universities was a bargain. “We do every little thing for them,” he said. “We
furnish the theater, the actors, the lights, the music, and the audience for a drama measured neatly in time slots. They bring the camera and turn it on” (2011, pp. 2-3).

The University of Washington is no different. As a matter of fact, construction cranes towered over and the sparks from welders’ instruments flew about the steel skeleton of Husky Stadium as my four-week observation period took place during its year-and-a-half renovation. As a power player in the Pacific Northwest, the university depends on the spectacle – and Athletic Communications department’s messaging is intended to enhance the spectacle and strengthen relationships designed to enhance it. The spectacle provides the university publicity from which it gleans students and tuition dollars, and supporters who donate money. The UW athletic department and athletic director Scott Woodward win, as well, bringing in tens of millions of dollars from network media deals. UW was one of 22 of 120 NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision teams in 2010 that independently earns a profit and does not dip into tuition funds to escape a deficit. (NCAA Publications, 2011). The athletic department also creates partnerships with the wealthiest and most powerful corporations and individuals in the region. Those partners – corporate sponsors and individual boosters – win, too, as they revel exclusively in parts of the stadium the common ticket holder cannot access, such as the Tyee Club, its premier seats, and the posh Don James Center for pre-game meals and banquets.

With his unfettered power over the daily operations and routines of many athletic department staffers and players, football coach Steve Sarkisian could also be seen as a winner. Given his hefty salary and instantaneous spot among the region’s rich and powerful, this stands to reason. His power in the athletic department is immense, but it is
limited to minutia in the grander sense of the cultural hegemony of big-time college football. He dictates the routines of his own assistant coaches, of athletic department staffers – including Bell – and of his own football players. However, it could be argued that Sarkisian is a loser in this game, as well. This is explained later in this chapter.

The Sports/Media Complex is also a winner as the cultural hegemony of big-time college football is reinforced for its benefit, too. The traditional media outlets and GoHuskies.com, as noted in Chapters Three and Four, publish content so similar in topic and tone that it is often times difficult to distinguish. Bell’s role as traditional journalist makes the content even more undecipherable at times, too, as his stories read much like those found in the traditional media outlets. For the Athletic Communications department, this is by design and new technologies have allowed for it to create and distribute its own messages. For the traditional media, however, this is a win in its capitalistic pursuit as fans, but a failing of balanced journalism; positive stories about the football program help to sell newspapers and help to secure advertising, but it does not mean that the stories are complete or balanced. As noted in Chapter One, the Sports/Media Complex is a profit-seeking symbiosis between sports organization and media outlets. It also undercuts the notion that messages are the commodity of the media, but that rather the audience is the commodity. The partnership between UW and the state’s largest newspaper, the Seattle Times, is obvious. When news broke about the Huskies’ 2013 game against Illinois in Chicago, the Athletic Communications staff produced a press release and the Times was one of the recipients to which it was distributed. The Times reporter Bob Condotta counted on the Athletic Communications staff for that information. He also depends on the staff to make coaches and players
available for interviews, to host press conferences, to provide him with a seat and
Internet access during the games. To be sure, the bureaucratic layers at UW and whims
of the coach shape Condotta’s work routines, too, though his routines and stories,
however, are beyond the scope of this study. There are also advertising/sponsorship
exchanges between the UW athletic department and the Times. The Seattle Times’s
masthead can be found on highly visible signage in the rafters of UW’s basketball arena
as evidence of a sponsorship deal. UW advertises its sporting events in the pages of the
Times and on SeattleTimes.com. Even more, when the UW football team does well, the
newspapers sell. Negative palls cast on the program do not particularly help sales.

Woodward described this relationship to me:

I view traditional media outlets as partners. … The days of reporting in silos,
when you just report and just do this, those days are gone. We need each other to
survive. I need the messages sent out through traditional outlets. There’s the day-
to-day reporting, stuff on recruiting, our human-interest stories – there’s a niche
for that. Those traditional and non-traditional outlets need us to generate content,
access, good content – all the things that matter and we need to help. We run
advertising, and we try to market. That’s different from the journalistic
standpoint, but they all start to blur – the PR, the news, the advertising – it blurs.
… [But,] I have to partner with them, I have to have good relations so our
product continues to get the most eyeballs (personal communication, August 28,
2012).

Woodward does not even attempt to disguise that the stories published on
GoHuskies.com are a product, something to sell. Thus, the partnership with the
traditional media outlets ensures the consolidation of monopoly capitalism, according to
Jhally, and the messages – disseminated by both GoHuskies.com and the traditional
outlets – become self-fulfilling as fan communities are intentionally led to
misunderstand “the class nature of capitalist reality” (Jhally, 1984, p. 54). In other
words, the political and economic power holders are the university and the owners of the
media outlet, while the audience/consumer eats what they serve. With this intentional misleading of the audience/consumer, the Sports/Media Complex wins.

Specifically, in this examination of the roles, routines, and messages of the UW Athletic Communications staff, another winner is the “Global White Sports/Media Complex.” This concept, developed by Carrington, takes Jhally’s idea even further to include issues of racial inequalities (Carrington, 2012). As mentioned in Chapter Two, the main players in this study – athletic director Scott Woodward, association athletic director O.D. Vincent, assistant athletic director for Athletic Communications Carter Henderson, director of writing Gregg Bell, director of athletic communications Jeff Bechtold, and head football coach Steve Sarkisian are all white men. Bell is highly educated and racially sensitive from all have I gleaned from my observation and previous working relationship. None of the articles he produced during my observation period fell into common narratives of race. However, the perception that they could fall into such narratives is strong given the overwhelming white maleness of the hierarchy – especially since a majority of the football players are young men of color.

We see Marx’s idea that “the only wheels which political economy set into motion are greed and the war amongst the greedy – competition” alive in college football as universities rush to upgrade facility after facility on the taxpayers’ dime, to hire coaches at ever-increasing salaries using tuition dollars, to nab the hottest recruit, to net the biggest, most lucrative network deal. Remember, the taxpayers are also typically the same people buying tickets, merchandise, watching on TV. It goes on and on. The messages published on GoHuskies.com use the narrative of competition to normalize this bloodlust and money grab. Yet, the biggest winner in this infected arena of big-time
college football is the cultural hegemony of football itself and, in Seattle, that includes institutions and individual right out of Marx’s bourgeoisie – the University of Washington, the highly profitable athletic department, the corporate and individual boosters, the head coach to an extent, and the Sports/Media Complex, particularly the “Global White Sports/Media Complex.”

The Losers

With so few winners in this game, the number of losers is overwhelming. The losers include the athletes, the off-the-field workers, the opiate-blinded fan community, and the critical audience. These are the exploited.

Branch went to great lengths in his article to explain how universities, athletic conferences, and the NCAA exploit college football players, typically men between the ages of 18 and 22 (Branch, 2011). He explained how they sign away their constitutional rights of due process, how they are unable to make money off their athletic work and talents, and how neither the NCAA nor their school financially compensate them outside of scholarships, all under the guise of “amateurism,” (Branch, 2011). I agree with Branch, but am not examining that kind of exploitation in this study. Rather, the exploitation this study reveals is two-fold: 1.) The exploitation of the player’s individual story, 2.) The exploitation of the player’s place in the cultural hegemony of college football. First, GoHuskies.com publishes articles that reveal the players’ lives. This is no different from the pursuits of the traditional media, of course. Traditional reporters tell stories to sell newspapers. However, GoHuskies.com and Bell specifically are not telling stories to sell views on a website. Rather, they are revealing the players’ lives to sell the tickets to come see the players’ performances on the field. In other words, the athlete is
being rung up twice – once for his personal life, his family history, an act of kindness, a moment of vulnerability revealed; another for his blood and sweat on the football field. Because of this, everything the athlete does in his personal life can become a selling instrument to watch him play on Saturday. Remember, this is not a professional, or a mature man being paid handsomely for his physical exploits. This is a young person who is not being financially compensated for his talent, effort, work, or for his persona. Some will argue that the players come out as winners in this exchange value because they receive scholarships. At the University of Washington, a five-year scholarship covering in-state tuition, room and board, and books equals $271,395 (Student Office of Financial Aid, 2012). But what does it cost the university in real money? Assets it already has, such as classrooms, professors, dorm beds (Telander, 1989). It is not as if the football players are taking the place of full tuition-paying students. They are not.

Further, the scholarships are not guaranteed year-to-year. While it is considered to be a boon for recruiting purposes to pull scholarships, when a coaching regime changes, players are commonly left without scholarships and to fend for themselves.

What about the value of the education those players do get if they stay for four or five years? The NCAA released its 2012 graduation success rates and showed that 70% of Football Bowl Subdivision athletes graduate in four years (“NCAA graduation rates,” ESPN.com, 2012). The numbers are compiled over four years, from the freshmen classes of 2002-03 through 2005-06. At UW, the number was even higher at 74%. (According to the Federal Graduation Rate established by the U.S. Department of Education, this means Huskies football players graduated 7% more than the non-athletic student.)
Despite the positivism of these statistics, measuring the effectiveness of the educations of those who do graduate is a difficult task. Telander’s “Hundred Yard Lie” suggests that many of those who do graduate are still unprepared for the rigors of the workplace after spending four to five years in subservience to a coaching staff (1989). Telander also suggests football players are encouraged simply to remain academically eligible rather than engage in intellectual and professional growth and pursuit. He pointed to several examples of successful college football players taking courses such as Billiards, Bowling, Soccer, History of Football, Water Color Painting, Racquetball, Human Sexuality, Leisure, and Adjusting to a University (Telander, 1989, pp. 66-67). To further prove this, he showed that admissions levels can be lowered to ensure quality athletes get into the program and revealed many examples of former college football players struggling to find jobs and adapt off the football field. (1989).

Second, the athlete is being exploited for his position within the cultural hegemony of college football. Without the athlete, this finely-tuned, money-making endeavor is nonexistent. Thus, it is critical for the power elite to deliver the athletes themselves a narrative about why it is both noble and important that they are there. Bell’s feature stories reek of these narratives:

- Team loyalty: Danny Shelton said he will be a “Husky for life” (Bell, August 29, 2012).
- Buying in to the system: Drew Schaefer said, “We believed what [the coaches] taught us and we believed in the philosophy they brought into the program” (Bell, August 22, 2012).
- The promise for team and individual success: Bell wrote of the first day of
practice: [Sarkisian] believes these Dawgs are mentally tough enough to strive for those loftier goals in 2012 (Bell, August 6, 2012).

- Overcoming injury to get back on the field: Offensive linemen Colin Tanigawa after coming back from reconstructive knee surgery. “It wasn’t easy,” he said, recalling the endless hours grinding and painfully flexing his knee inside UW’s athletic training room . . . “I’m just glad I only had to miss two games and I’m back here competing, playing football” (Bell, August 16, 2012).

These narratives are the carrots at the end of the string for these players. And the players are the ones who are sacrificing their physical labor and, in many cases their health for the hope of winning, of playing beyond college, or being connected to the brand of UW football in hopes that it will offer them something tangible. They believe in the concept of Marx’s exchange value, but these stories are being used to make them believe they are on the positive end of those exchanges when they, in fact, are not.

The off-the-field workers at UW are also losers in this game. With the exception of Woodward, the administrative staff in the athletic department is highly replaceable – even head coach Steve Sarkisian. Despite his high salary and power over the daily routines within the athletic department, Sarkisian himself is still a replaceable cog in the capitalist machine responsible for the spectacle of UW football. His position as a winner is fickle, for if he does not perform to expectations – if the team does not win – he will be fired and replaced with another high-salaried, power-wielding coach. This implicit pressure may be what drives Sarkisian to such displays of control in realms outside of
the football field, like in personally editing stories for GoHuskies.com. Woodward, who
– on paper, at least – is Sarkisian’s superior, supports this. Woodward said:

[Sarkisian] is the [chief operating officer] of football. He’s not just the head
coach anymore. This horse has been out of the barn a long time and the good
[coaches] figure it out. If you can control your messages and you can have a
good understanding of what you’re doing as a program, not just as a “football
team between the lines,” that’s good. It’s much more than that these days. I’m
very pleased that Steve is engaged from that standpoint (personal
communication, August 30, 2012).

However, when Woodward said this to me, it seemed as if he would have been
positive about whatever it was that Sarkisian was attempting to control. Other personnel
are caught up in an end game to promote the spectacle. Their salaries are largely fixed,
their power limited. Their decision-making abilities are relegated to a circus arena of
problems that have already been solved, for the most part. They are the quintessential
middle managers. Henderson embodies this. While my fieldwork focused on Bell and
his routines, it was impossible not to encounter Henderson at many turns. An assistant
athletic director, Henderson attempts to come across as a man with power, but he is
another cog in the machine of the cultural hegemony of college football. He appeared to
be a “yes man,” one who took orders from the football office and from Woodward and
attempted to use those associations to wield power himself. The attempts I saw failed.
For example, when Bell was trying to get the Shelton story published, Bell acted as a
middle man. He succumbed to the whims of the football office, which was hesitant
about the story, and kept putting off publishing it. However, when Bell continued to
press, Henderson passed the responsibility of publishing to his superior, Woodward. He
sent Bell an email during a football practice he knew Bell was attending that Woodward
wanted the final say on the story. It was just a convenience that Bell checked his email
on his iPhone and saw Henderson’s email. This seemed to be a passive aggressive move on Henderson’s part. It also seemed that Henderson was trying to buy time – if Bell did not check his email at practice, he would have missed Woodward and the story would have to wait another week to be published. When Bell chased Woodward down at practice and asked him to read the story on Bell’s iPhone, Woodward looked as if he had no idea about what Bell was talking. If Woodward had really told Henderson that he wanted the final OK on the story, it sure did not look it. I am clearly making some assumptions here, but this is simply an example of Henderson’s lack of power, an instance used to show that he is simply a worker of the proletariat who happens to wear a coat and tie. Bell and Bechtold do not typically wear ties, but they also fall in this category as replaceable members of the college football promotions apparatus. Bell and Bechtold are means of mental production for the apparatus. They provide for it; they do not run it. They have jobs, but they have no power. This is a characteristic of Marx’s proletariat.

According to Marx, “the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it” (Marx in Tucker, 1972, p. 136). If the UW athletic department is providing the mental production, its subjects are the fans, a largely opiate-blinded fan community made up of what the Athletic Communications staff calls “stakeholders.” This condescending term implies the fans have an investment in its team. In reality, they do not. Despite all the ills addressed above, this intoxicated community does not demand change. Rather, it shows up at the games, watches on TV, purchases merchandise, develops cultural routines around the spectacle, and ignores the unjustness and the victimization of it. In other words, it is subject to the mental production of UW, in this
case. It is doing – for the most part – exactly what the cultural hegemony of college football demands; it is feeding it.

There is, however, a critical audience. There is a small contingent of people – typically academics – who want reform, who want to disintegrate the silos of the political economy of college football and end the cultural hegemony of it. They write scholarly and mainstream articles. They write books. But their messages seem to be largely lost in the hum of the rhetoric of loyalty and fervor. Traitors, beware! This critical audience also loses in this game. Bell’s stories help to produce fervor among the Huskies fan community. Thus, the fan community demands more from the traditional media. The traditional media then attempts to emulate Bell, which was evident in the repeating of the same topics and subjects through my observation period. With the traditional media emulating Bell, Woodward becomes prophetic – PR and journalism blurs. Examining the messages produced by the traditional media is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but is an area ripe for more research as it largely appeared, through the course of my observation period, that the traditional journalists were, in fact, emulating Bell. The critical audience is given fluff stories by its traditional media because the fan community, which may be buying newspapers, is demanding them. Imagine if the Penn State scandal had never been broken because the local newspaper continued to publish stories praising Joe Paterno’s body of work as the winningest coach in college football. As it stands, that story may have been broken years earlier if the local media had not been doing just that. Bell’s stories largely plays a narrative to which the fan community loves to sing along. The critical audience loses when that noise drowns out the sound of anything else.
The losers in this game – the athletes, the off-the-field workers, the fan community, and the critical audience – form what Marx conceived as the proletariat. They are not the ruling material force, nor are they the ruling intellectual force. Rather, they eat up the ideology that has made college football a cultural hegemony of its own.
CONCLUSION: THE POSTGAME WRAP-UP

“Fervor is the weapon of choice of the impotent.”
– Frantz Fanon

Sport is powerful. We know this because we see sport’s influence and reach all around us. We know this because we are inundated with the corruption that follows power. We witness it in egregious scandals in which powerful men protect a brand over children, and privilege profit and power over justness. This dissertation has described how the tools and operations at one major university football program – the University of Washington – are used to maintain the cultural hegemony of college football in all its economic and political power. It revealed how the UW structures the routines of one athletic communications employee – director of writing Gregg Bell – to control the spectacle by influencing content. Ultimately, the structures used to maintain and expand the cultural hegemony of college football simultaneously put material interests ahead of human interests.

This hegemony is entrenched and, without serious college football reform, the prospects of change are slim. Thus, this dissertation, in conclusion, offers reality-based approaches to incremental changes to attempt to acknowledge to the human interests at stake in this game. In order to free itself of this exploitative grip, UW would be wise to abolish its story-telling mission and restructure its athletic communications staff to be transparent in its selling duties. However, as university athletic departments increase budgets and become more technologically and communicatively advanced, it is not reasonable to expect that they will do any of this. Rather, it will likely seek to construct stronger and more exploitative connections with stakeholders at the expense of football
players, off-the-field workers, and other losers in this game. However, it could take three simple implementations to begin to reprioritize the human interests over the material interests:

- Eliminate Bell’s multiple routines as traditional journalist, PR practitioner, and subordinate. Rather, make him a PR practitioner only and structure his role around his strong writing skills for PR messaging.

As noted in Chapter Five, the UW took a risk in hiring Bell, a professional journalist, but those from the journalism field typically do not have an investment or an understanding of stakeholder relations. There are simple ways to grow Bell’s investment in that, however. The athletic communications department has done a poor job of cultivating Bell’s investment in stakeholder relations. First, keeping Bell in the pack of traditional media workers is a mistake. To the football players, he immediately looks like an outsider. He appears to be a traditional media worker who, in an era of college football scandal, the players are taught to fear. It is imperative that Bell is clearly identified to players and coaches as an insider. If this were to happen, he would likely be more apt to feel like an insider and to cultivate his personal connection to the stakeholders. The football program has the capacity to tap into Bell’s expertise, but does not use it. I suggest using Bell as a media coach to host media workshops with players and coaches. This serves two purposes: 1.) It would get Bell in front of the players and coaches while simultaneously giving the players the sense that he is on their team. 2.) It is a valuable service that would help the players to pitch their own stories to members of the traditional media outlets. Instead of being blatantly exploited, the players can offer their own version of their lives. Given Bell’s integrity, he strives to do his job well. He
tells his feature stories in a positive light. His previews and game stories are insightful, relevant, and rarely include negative quotes or notions adhering to the editorial messaging rules in the Strategic Communications Plan (Department of Intercollegiate Athletics, 2011, p. 4). But there is still little trust – even less evidence of any sort of non-subordinate relationship – between Bell and Sarkisian. High-ranking administrators at UW need to help facilitate this relationship and breed that trust.

- Clear up the PR message found in the athletics department at UW and on GoHuskies.com.

This is partly because there are too many messages on too many platforms. GoHuskies.com is in competition with CoachSark.com, for example. And, on both of those sites, there are too many types of content, as Ruihley et al. suggested in their 2011 study. Nowhere in the UW Strategic Communications Plan is the “bottom line” mentioned, but it is a phrase repeated several times in my interview with Henderson, who was the primary author of the plan. The PR workers would better understand the PR messaging if the strategy were honestly laid out and the lines clearly drawn between the messages and the “bottom line.” Sharpening those lines are critical to a clean PR message. There is also something to be said about the exploitative nature of PR messages. They are the messages of the capitalistic plight, the messages of controlling the spectacle. While the cultural hegemony would be exposed in revealing the purpose of the messages, the prioritization of human interests could begin to take place.

- Scale back the involvement of the football office in messaging.

The over-involvement of head football coach Steve Sarkisian and the football operations staff relating to content is an obvious impediment to Bell’s messaging, as
well as to the overall PR messaging. It should be up to assistant athletic director Carter Henderson and Bell to take Sarkisian’s recruiting message and implement it into the overall strategic communications plan – not for Sarkisian to squeeze the strategic communication plan into his recruiting message. Getting Sarkisian and the football operations staff out of the communication business immediately eliminates the problem of too many different kinds of messages, completing platforms, and the awkward, subordinate relationship of communications workers to Sarkisian. A PR professional should be in the position to take the lead on this.

The reality of college football, however, is that none of this is likely to occur. Fans need to know this. Journalism and PR professors and students need to know this.

Journalism schools simply must teach students to embrace more of a watchdog role and get the stars out of their eyes. They must let PR students in on this, as well. The reporter who broke the Penn State-Sandusky scandal was a 24-year old crime reporter, Sara Ganim, then of the (Harrisburg) Patriot News. She challenged the cultural hegemony of college football by questioning the power structures of Penn State football. She did not make friends with head coach Joe Paterno. The athletic communications staffers attempted to take her credential when she attended games searching for connections to the Sandusky story. Students that come into sports journalism classes do so adoring the spectacle, rooting for their favorite teams, being in awe of their beloved coaches and players. Replacing this fervor and fandom with critical analysis and the lack of fear to write about it must be the top priority of professors teaching sports journalism and PR courses. The professors need to impress upon their students that there is more than the spoon-fed press releases, statistics, and canned news conferences. They need to
get their students beyond the spectacle. For example, the next generation of journalists must see beyond the pomp and circumstance that will surely surround the opening of the newly-renovated Husky Stadium in September 2013. Rather, they must see that 21,000 of the 70,000 seats will be luxury seats. They will sell from $1,050 each for Club Husky seats to $60,000 for luxury suites. This is important for scholars outside of communications research and education, as well. It is important across business and marketing programs, athletic administration programs, and for scholars who are employed at universities in which athletics are “big time.” Lest we want to be duped, we need to be able to tie the concepts of consumptionist capitalism and the Sports/Media Complex to the structures of power within universities’ athletic communications staffs, routines, and messages. Branch, Jhally, Ganim, and other critical pieces must become required reading. There are bigger questions about college football that are beyond the scope of this dissertation. But these questions must be addressed by sports media educators and must be acknowledged and internalized by their students.

There is also much more to be researched. This dissertation did not examine the messages of the traditional media beyond the obvious comparisons of them with those produced by GoHuskies.com. It should be done to determine if the traditional media is, in fact, serving up PR messaging and neglecting its watchdog role. This dissertation made mention of racial ordering to support the spectacle. A deeper dive into those waters is suggested, as is an investigation of gender ordering to promote and maintain the spectacle. With such a theoretical inclination toward Marxism, the notion of Marxist feminism being a lens through which to look at this problem could be important. Finally, more study on college football as cultural hegemony would be noteworthy and could
yield an endless line of significant research involving different methods and tangible outcomes.

While the bigger questions are beyond the scope of this dissertation, it does, however, go to the heart of the messaging produced by the athletic departments involved to maintain the power of college football. The cultural hegemony of college football will insist that the messaging emanating from its own departments will continue to blur lines between journalism and PR, it will continue to place material interests over human interests, and it will continue to protect brand affinity above all else. Why? Because college football is powerful – and those involved in creating that spectacle will continue to do all they can to maintain and perpetuate it.
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APPENDIX A: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN
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**Important Notice:**

For a comprehensive overview of the document, please refer to the Table of Contents or the comprehensive guide provided at the beginning of the document.
AUDIENCE

Objective: Increase local media exposure to athletic programs.

Media & Constituent Relations

EDITORIAL MESSAGING

Department of Internal Communications

ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS

OVERVIEW
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SUCCESS

Inspiring champions on the field and in the classroom
It's the Washington way... discover what's next.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AWARDS RECOGNITION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Football Bowl Victory</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Conference Player of the Year</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Conference Coach of the Year</strong></td>
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<td><strong>National Player of the Year</strong></td>
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<td><strong>All-American Selection</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Team Coordinator Tournament Champions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>International Tournament Champions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Team National Champions</strong></td>
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**Splash Page on Website**

**Promotional Banner on Website**

**Social Media Recognition**

**Study Coverage on Website**

**AWARDS RECOGNITION**

**Policy for Honoring Awards and Champions**
CREATIVE COMMUNICATIONS

EDITORIAL MESSAGE  CREATIVE COMMUNICATIONS
## Sports Information Director Travel Policy

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<th>EVENT COVERAGE</th>
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<th>2 HOME NON-CONFERENCE EVENT</th>
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<th>WWW'S BASEBALL</th>
<th>WWW'S BASKETBALL</th>
<th>WWW'S FOOTBALL</th>
<th>WWW'S GOLF</th>
<th>WWW'S TENNIS</th>
<th>WWW'S SOCCER</th>
<th>WWW'S CROSS COUNTRY</th>
<th>WWW'S GYMNASIUM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
WASHINGTON

Crisis Communications Plan

STEPS TO COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA PLAN

1. Assess the Appropriate Personnel

2. Identify Communication and Media Plan

3. Set Clear, Coherent Objectives

4. Develop a Comprehensive Strategy

5. Establish Key Messages

6. Plan for Media Contacts

7. Prepare for Public Relations

8. Monitor and Evaluate

Crisis Communications Plan

Media and Communication Actions

Crisis Communications Plan