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Expanding Our Methodological Toolbox: The “Place” of Twitter in the Ethnographic Endeavor

Abstract Social media have been increasingly embraced by social actors inhabiting a wide range of social worlds, including the world of professional sports. This paper argues that Twitter has become an indispensable resource for sociologists seeking to better understand these worlds. Using data collected for a study of the Canadian Football League (CFL), the paper contrasts traditional interviews and Twitter as sources of data. This is followed by a discussion of both the unique advantages and limitations of Twitter data in research. The paper ends by encouraging an expansion of sociology’s methodological toolbox to include this form of social media.

Keywords Social Media; Twitter; Methodological Toolbox; Sources of Data; Canadian Football League

With the rise of the Internet, more people are using new communication technologies such as email, short message service (SMS), social media sites, and social networking sites. Much of everyday life is taking place on the Internet, and the distinction between online and offline reality is

becoming less useful. As a consequence, a noticeable number of researchers in the field suggest we need to turn our attention to how these two spaces (online-offline) interact with and transform each other (Haythornthwaite and Kazmer 2002; Salaff 2002; Bakardjieva 2005; Beneito-Montagut 2011). Specifically, as people incorporate more computer-mediated communication into their daily lives (Mann and Stewart 2000; Whitty 2002; 2003; 2004; Clegg Smith 2004), the use of these technologies has become a taken-for-granted aspect of social life (Bruce and Hogan 1998; Star 1999). Recognition of this fact means ethnographers must also begin to identify how our research subjects use online communications, and expand our methodological toolbox to fully capture the social world we are studying.

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Among the most popular of the new technologies is Twitter. Twitter is a social media website that gives users the ability to share their thoughts and opinions with others, and in turn read and comment on others’ thoughts. Twitter is considered a micro-blogging service, which allows users to post and read 140 character “tweets.” It is considered a hybrid of social interactions and media (Altheide and Schneider 2013). Social media disseminate information like radio or TV, where users can find links to newspaper articles, videos, blogs, and so forth. Twitter is designed to facilitate social interaction, the sharing of digital media, and collaboration, as well as having aspects of social network technologies (Facebook, LinkedIn), where users connect with each other by sharing ideas, pictures, et cetera (Murthy 2012). Both the popularity and accessibility of Twitter as a personal news media tool used by members of the community-at-large makes it a force to be considered by ethnographers interested in the social organization of everyday life.

This paper describes how Twitter became an important “place” within which to gain intimate familiarity with a particular social world, that is, the world of professional sports. Specifically, I draw upon data gathered through my research study on the lived experiences of players and their families as part of the Canadian Football League (CFL). As part of that project, I struggled to find places where I could “hang out” and observe professional football players and their families in a natural setting. I constantly felt like an outsider—I was a woman in a male-dominated field, I was not an athlete, nor was I part of any media organization. When I attended alumni events and professional team events

(e.g., training camp), I felt uncomfortable and worried that people were suspicious of me. While these factors did not prevent me from attending as many events as possible and conducting face-to-face interviews, I began to note Twitter served as an invaluable resource for gathering fieldwork data. To my surprise, Twitter became a “place” where I would log on every day and view newspaper articles, player tweets, blogs posted, and videos related to professional football.

What made this kind of access to professional football possible is the degree to which members of the professional sport world have adopted social media. Athletes, coaches, and reporters are using Twitter to connect directly with fans and each other instead of having their messages filtered through the public relations departments of sports organizations and mainstream media outlets (Hambrick et al. 2010). Twitter can offer fans unprecedented access to professional athletes and their personal and social lives (Hambrick et al. 2010). Athletes can develop their own Twitter pages and use them to discuss their playing performances and interact with teammates and fans.

Similar to the representation of other professional sports on Twitter, the CFL has many players, coaches, and team personnel using this social media to connect with fans, reporters, and others. CFL players using this social media range from rookies to all-star veterans. CFL teams use Twitter to communicate team information, events, and charity opportunities. The CFL organization also has representation on Twitter. For example, people can follow the CFL commissioner, the CFL media personnel, and

the Canadian Football League Players’ Association (CFLPA).

In a similar fashion, sport reporting has become prominent on Twitter. In terms of the media covering the CFL, you can follow the CFL panel on TSN, as well as the beat reporters of each team. Each media organization has at least one Twitter account that keeps its followers up-to-date with the latest news around the league.

Being able to compare both traditional interviews and Twitter-generated material gave me the opportunity to appreciate both the benefits and the limitations of Twitter as a source of data for scholarly research. Those issues are outlined in the following sections. I begin with a discussion of how sociologists tend to treat online material as data with a specific focus on social media (Twitter). Second, I address the benefit of using social media, Twitter, in an ethnographic study. Throughout this section, I draw on the field notes I created to understand tweets, articles, blog posts, and videos that athletes, coaches, and reporters post. Third, I address some of the limitations of using Twitter as a methodological tool. Finally, I conclude by addressing the larger methodological debates around online research, and argue that Twitter provides a unique “place” to do field research and, as such, needs to be included as part of the methodological toolbox used by ethnographers.

Online Methods: Using Social Media as Data

The use of Internet-generated qualitative data has typically fallen under the umbrella of an online

ethnography or “virtual ethnography” (Hine 2008). Some researchers studying online settings argue “virtual” sites of research differ greatly from traditional “real world” settings (Hine 2000; Lysloff 2003). These researchers rely solely on data collected online—blogs, chat rooms, forums—where the researcher could not be physically present (Beneito-Montagut 2011). These virtual sites usually come from listserv, where *all* interaction between group members occurs online (Garcia et al. 2009). For example, Walstrom’s (2000) study of eating disorders and LeBesco’s (2004) study of the experience of being overweight are both based on support communities that exist only virtually. Ethnographers who adopt this perspective argue social life of online support communities can be examined without considering the “offline” world.

On the other hand, other sociologists have argued that the social world contains both traditional and technologically advanced modes of communication and social activity (Lyman and Wakeford 1999; Ruhleder 2000; Garcia et al. 2009; Beneito-Montagut 2011). To quote Garcia and colleagues (2009),

“Virtual Reality” is not a reality separate from other aspects of human action and experience, but rather a part of it. Therefore, ethnographers should define the field or setting of their research on the basis of their research topic. (p. 54)

The boundaries between online and offline communication are increasingly becoming blurred regarding the message, the situation, and the interaction (Haythornthwaite and Kazmer 2002; Salaff 2002; Carter 2004). Beneito-Montagut (2011) proposes

a methodological position of an “expanded ethnography” to capture individuals’ use of online interaction in a holistic manner. By adopting the “expanded ethnography” approach, researchers are encouraged to consider both “online” and “offline” human action and experience as data.

Notably, sociologists who approach their studies from a symbolic interactionist perspective and favor traditional ethnographic research have always been open to the use of whatever material sheds light on human group life (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Spector 1980). This approach requires what Cooley (1909) has called sympathetic introspection. Ethnographers aim to gain intimate familiarity with social actors in the empirical world by immersing themselves in their research participants’ social world (Blumer 1969), with the objective of achieving an intersubjective understanding of the viewpoints and experiences of the other (Prus 2005). To achieve this understanding, researchers place emphasis on the ways that people actually engage in the activities that constitute human group life (Prus 2005). This requires researchers to do everything possible to get to that life and know what is going on in it (Blumer 1969). Thus, using social media, such as Twitter, gives researchers another avenue into the social world under investigation.

Further, ethnographic research has always consisted of not only observations, participant observations, and in-depth interviews but also the examination of a broad range of documents that, in one way or another, capture people’s lives. Among these documents are journalistic accounts, autobiographies, diaries, and personal letters (Her-

man-Kinney and Verschaeve 2003). As Glaser and Strauss (1967) note,

When someone stands in the library stacks, he is, metaphorically, surrounded by voices begging to be heard. Every book, every magazine article, represents at least one person who is equivalent to the anthropologist’s informant or the sociologist’s interviewee. In those publications, people converse, announce positions, argue with a range of eloquence, and describe events or scenes in ways entirely comparable to what is seen and heard during fieldwork. The researcher needs only to discover the voices in the library to release them for his analytic use. (p. 163)

Although a new form of communication, Twitter resonates with such voices. Every tweet, posting, and blog represents a person who has an opinion/idea that he/she wants to be heard and conveyed to others. Thus, like a sociologist’s interviewees, these voices can be tapped for the insights they offer into the perspectives and experiences of social actors.

In recognition of the potential richness of such data, Altheide and Schneider (2013) offer a way to study online communication technologies, called “ethnographic content analysis” (ECA). Derived from the theoretical and methodological position of symbolic interactionism and traditional ethnographic research, ECA supports traditional ethnographic research by placing importance on understanding the social meaning of actors, including, but not exclusive to, social contexts, situations, experiences, emotions, identities, and relationships. Conducting ECA, researchers are encouraged to focus on the emergent themes and categories expressed through media forms such as Twitter.

ECA treats online content (e.g., postings, tweets, newspaper articles) as documents. Documents are defined as any symbolic representation that can be recorded or retrieved for analysis—documents are studied to understand culture by examining “the process and the array of objects, symbols, and meanings that make up the social reality shared by members of a society” (Altheide and Schneider 2013:5). Altheide and Schneider’s (2013:20) position on documents enables researchers to “(a) place symbolic meaning in context; (b) track the process of its creation and influence on social definitions; (c) let our understanding emerge through detailed investigation.” The aim of ECA is to be systematic and analytic, but not rigid, so one can focus on themes and categories as they emerge rather than predetermining them. ECA uses *constant discovery* and *constant comparison* of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Berg 1989; Altheide and Schneider 2013).

Benefits of Twitter in the Research Process

Turning now to my own experience using social media, my study of the CFL involved collecting data in a number of ways. Besides collecting “online” documents (Twitter), I engaged in participant observations and conducted traditional face-to-face interviews. I took the triangulation approach advised by Denzin (1978), who insists that researchers use multiple methods with a variety of data as a means of increasing the depth of theoretical understanding of the material evoked in their research project. My inclusion of Twitter as part of my methodological

toolkit allowed me to glean insight into the social world I would otherwise not have gained.

Twitter is very public and instantaneous, making it easy to access a variety of people and topics. I started by following 150 members of the CFL. I would read through tweets daily, recording themes and ideas that would emerge. The sheer volume of daily tweets made it difficult to be comprehensive. For that reason, I began using the “favorite” function, which identified lines of exchanges that appeared to be particularly interesting or significant. I then copied these tweets, pasted them into a PDF document, and labeled them according to the date of posting. I used a PDF format because the data could be easily searched using keywords, people, events, and hashtags.¹ This made it possible to create a new PDF file for every searched item. Further, saving data in a PDF file allowed me to interact with the document, that is, the online sites remained active and could be easily accessed by clicking the link as it was provided in the tweets (Altheide and Schneider 2013). Using PDF documents allowed me to easily organize, search, and access online documents.

After a year of following over 150 Twitter accounts that were tied to the CFL (players, coaches, reporters, spouses, etc.), reading countless newspaper articles, watching online interviews and blogs, and reading Twitter discussions, I finally started to get a sense of the daily activities of athletes, the issues they were discussing, their viewpoints on a range

¹ A hashtag (#) is a function of Twitter that allows users to describe and search the subject of a tweet rather than specific content (Ovadia 2009). Users use hashtags to “mark tweets topically so that others can follow the conversations centering on a particular topic” (Boyd, Golder, and Lotan 2010:1).

of issues, and the situations that preoccupied them and their families. There is no way to know with certainty whether the athletes themselves are sending the tweets—sometimes family members will tweet on their behalf. But, tweets sent out in the athletes’ names come to represent them, and are viewed by the community that reads them as reflections of who they are and what they think. Similarly, I have taken a similar stance in collecting my data. Specifically, I accept Twitter postings as a public representation of that athlete’s account. Twitter provides access to conversations between players, coaches, reporters, and fans. In this way, by using Twitter, I was able to grasp the symbolic meanings that the athletes themselves defined as important and real—their “definition of situations” and “construction of reality” (Thomas and Thomas 1928; Berger and Luckmann 1966).

To organize this data, I created a set of field notes that I divided into four categories: (1) emerging themes; (2) relationships among professional athletes; (3) debates, issues, and controversies around professional sports, and (4) future interview questions. In what follows, I explain how I used these four categories to understand the meanings, experiences, emotions, situations, and relationships expressed by participants. In this way, Twitter became the “place” to collect data and enter the social world.

Emerging Themes

The first type of field notes I started to write concerned the emerging themes and categories I identified in hashtags and tweets. There are many hashtags used specifically referencing the CFL

(e.g., #CFL, #TiCats, #Riders, #Als). But, after reading tweets and following players, other hashtags emerged. I found a wide range of hashtags used by players addressing a variety of topics.

A few hashtags that were common for players to use were: #grind, #camplife, #blessed, and #inspired. The hashtag #blessed is used commonly by professional football players. For example, one player tweeted: “7th professional football training camp in the books! #Blessed to still be living a dream! #NFL #CFL #Alouettes #Healthy #ComebackSeason” (June 18, 2013). Many players used the hashtag #blessed to give thanks for their opportunity or that God has blessed them with a gift to play football. Hashtags have helped me search words athletes are using to describe their daily activities, their viewpoints, and the ways they support their team. Additionally, as the example above revealed, I became more aware of, and sensitive to, how they perceived self as a football player in terms of “living a dream” and having support of unknown, superpowers such as God.

Hashtags can be beneficial to the research project, especially large generic hashtags like #CFL. By using hashtags, researchers can follow general trends of tweets about the social world under investigation, but also see the different discussions happening around events, people, or even the meanings people attach to hashtags.

However, not all tweets contain hashtags, thus it became important to not only rely on hashtags, but to continually click the “favorite” function to keep track of tweets people were posting. For example,

some of the early emerging themes included retirement, religion, honoring players, injuries, signing, trading, contracts, and life as an athlete. I gathered tweets that discussed career contingencies participants faced. The theme of career contingency included players, coaches, reporters, and others tweeting about players being released, traded, resigned, and other contract related issues. Thus, when a team traded one of its long-time players, a teammate tweeted, “It’s gonna be different looking across the locker and not seeing @geroysimon this is the bad part of the business. The best WR I have seen” (January 24, 2013). Another player tweeted, “I love this game & owe it so much but hearing @ronflemons 1 of my best friends & teammates ever get cut? ... I dunno man, no loyalty #argos #cfl” (January 24, 2013).

Data such as these verified my understanding of the meaning trades hold for those not traded. Football players face many career contingencies, and being cut or released is not only hard on the player but also on teammates. After collecting more tweets about other activities affecting their careers, the ways players experienced or gave meaning to these career uncertainties started to emerge. I could see that such uncertainties not only affected the player going through them but also other individuals, especially other players, who were affected by their teammate’s release or trade. Themes started to connect to other themes, such as family life, emotions, and teammates. And field notes would connect to each other as I started to map out the main contours of this particular social world.

Researchers who are interested in studying a group, a social world, or a subculture may find social me-

dia such as Twitter to be a valuable research tool for gaining intimate familiarity. There are many social worlds that have adopted Twitter as an online form of communication, such as the entertainment industry, religious organizations, political organizations, social movement groups. Researchers can use Twitter to collect data on the different meanings, experiences, emotions, and situations of members of the social world under investigation. Twitter can also help the researcher collect data on significant events, for example, an election, the world cup, natural disasters, and international conflicts. What makes Twitter a valuable research tool for ethnographers is that it makes geographical boundaries irrelevant and allows researchers to gain insight into the lives of those who may not be in close proximity.

Relationships Among Professional Football Players

Another advantage of using Twitter to study social life is that it gives researchers the ability to track users’ public conversations. Individuals who read the tweet then have the option to either retweet, that is, pass the tweet on to their followers, or to reply to the tweet. When I would pull up the original or first tweet, all the reply tweets would appear below. These additional data were particularly useful because I found smaller, peripheral conversations occurring between football players, coaches, reporters, and fans. This gave me access to the relationships between them.

Many players have different relationships with other players, coaches, and reporters. They would tweet each other frequently, talk about a friendship with an old teammate, and some players would attach

a photo of teammates hanging out or doing something. For example, one player tweeted, “Team comradery (sic) at its finest @calstampeters @park_a86 @steviebaggsjr #team #BBQ <http://instagr.am/p/R0jG3pNVU4/>” (November 09, 2013), and attached a picture of himself and his teammates at a barbecue. Other players would tweet personal messages to or about fellow players. For example, one participant sent a congratulatory tweet to newly retired player: “The Sultan is heading down to Toronto today to support his good friend @BIGMURPH56 in his retirement from a great career!! #cfl #CFLPA” (May 24, 2012). Players also tweet each other to wish each other luck on upcoming games: “Well wishes to all my old teammates playing in the big game today. Remp, Keep, JJ, JY, Pre. Bring it home fellas” (November 25, 2012).

Besides tracking relationships among teammates, public conversations also allowed me to consider relationships that players have with each in and around the league, and even with fans. Twitter conversations included followers wishing players luck on their upcoming game, players encouraging each other for the next game, players encouraging each other for the next game, or discussing more generic issues related to the sport. This information enabled me to map out the different relationships and associations that members of the CFL have with each other and the community-at-large.

For ethnographers interested in using Twitter to study a particular social world, they may find it beneficial to track the different conversations people have on the social media website because it can highlight the different relationships people have, who is communicating with each other (despite geo-

graphical boundaries), and help draw out different members of that particular group, subculture, or social world. By focusing on the relationships, researchers can map out and study the different forms of association and relationship in that particular social world.

Debates, Issues, and Controversies in Professional Sports

For those interested in studying a group, subculture, or social worlds, Twitter is useful in following the day-to-day issues that preoccupy the inhabitant of that social world. Many social problems come to be debated and defined within and between social worlds. Twitter offers the researcher an opportunity to examine how social problems become defined, the meanings people attach to that problem, and can illuminate the different claims and counter-claims being expressed by individuals and groups (Loseke 2003; Spector and Kitsuse 2006).

For example, in reading tweets daily, I noticed that the National Football League (NFL) and the CFL were connected by their common interest in certain debates, issues, or controversies in professional football. In these field notes, I would write down the problem under consideration and the different claim-makers and claims being made about that particular issue (Loseke 2003; Spector and Kitsuse 2006). For example, one issue that has affected professional sports in general is concussions, a particularly “hot topic” in professional hockey and football. Tweets enabled me to collect materials related to concussions, especially tweets with attached articles on concussions from the NFL and the CFL.

Both the NFL and CFL have become increasingly concerned with head injuries and the consequences of these injuries later in life. The following sample of tweets is provided to illustrate the range of topics tweeted in relation to head injuries. Some tweets are of a personal nature, reporting on specific players suffering from concussions. Other users have used Twitter to tweet about the latest research on concussion, newspaper articles, and court cases.

Drew Edwards I've talked to former #Ticats living w/ effects of multiple head injuries. It's not pretty. #CFL doing some but needs to do more. We all do. (October 04, 2012)

Retired NFL Players NFL's concussion crisis and head injuries may be way worse than first thought <http://wtsp.com> <http://on.wtsp.com/SFStnH> via @WTSP10News (November 04, 2012)

Off The Record 3 starting QBs went down with concussions on Sunday. Is this an issue that's flown under the radar? #ConcussionTalk (November 13, 2012)

NFLPA Former Players Receive New Neuro-Cognitive Benefit. #NFLPA release here: <http://bit.ly/THl-Wui> (December 07, 2012)

Retired NFL Players Concussion Liability Costs May Rise, and Not Just for N.F.L. <http://nyti.ms/UxQbFj> (December 10, 2012)

By following exchanges around particular issues such as this one, I was able to see how different social worlds and subcultures were connected to each other. I could see professional sports and the differ-

ent leagues dealing with head traumas were all connected by this larger social problem. Here, I started to get a sense of the issues players were facing and how the CFL was connected to the larger professional sport leagues like the NFL.

Future Interview Questions

The fourth type of field notes involved specific questions I could ask in future interviews. For example, one player tweeted while out due to injury, “Great lift and pool workout in today. #thankful4anotherchance #nodaysoff #road2recovery” (January 22, 2013) to keep his followers up-to-date with his recovery. Another example of an injury related tweet occurred when a player tweeted, “The days of being able to touch my face with my right hand are officially gone. Way too much calcium blockage in right elbow” (January 24, 2013). Collecting tweets about injuries prompted me to seek out information on additional injuries experienced by players, how they recovered, and the different meanings football players attached to different types of injuries.

Some interview questions were specific to an interview participant. Many of my participants are public figures and, as Spector (1980) argues, when conducting research on public figures, it pays to do one’s homework and to present oneself as having some background or knowledge about the subject for discussion. This is particularly important to my research because football players are public figures and information about their careers is thus publicly available. A quick Google search allows you to learn everything about a player’s career. Twitter can offer useful insight into a participant’s life and his

immediate concerns, information that can be used to great effect in an interview. Players using Twitter tweet about their everyday lives, schedules, training rituals, families, and opinions. Thus, before conducting an interview, I would search Twitter to see if my participants used the social media platform. If they did, I would go through their tweets to try to personalize the questions even more—with specific focus on their everyday life, things they might take for granted, or issues that might be uppermost on their mind.

As more people start to integrate social media and Twitter into their everyday lives, there is less of a distinction between “online” and “offline,” providing the researcher an opportunity to research participants prior to the interview process. Researchers can use participants’ Twitter pages and tweets to personalize their interview guides, create new questions, and gather information that would not have been known prior to interview. For this reason, Twitter provides an opportunity to inform interview questions and, at times, use their tweets as probes to encourage conversation and elicit detailed descriptions.

Limitations of Twitter

While there are numerous benefits to using Twitter, there are also limitations. During the time I was coding tweets and forming interview questions, I was conducting interviews with players and their spouses. I decided to ask questions about social media, specifically Twitter. I asked questions about using Twitter, what they would tweet, if they were afraid to use Twitter, if there were limitations on

what the player and spouse could tweet, and general questions about how social media have changed professional sports. In asking these questions, three limitations of Twitter-generated data emerged: (1) Tweets only provide a piece of the story; (2) there are (un)written rules to using Twitter; and (3) the status hierarchy in professional sports affects one’s freedom to tweet.

When tweets are compared with interview data, I realized Twitter provided limited information, whereas the interview data offered me a richer description of the experiences of professional players’ lives and families. For example, one player tweeted about his first year of retirement: “Last night was a huge test for me ... After watching ... I miss the game terribly ... But not a fraction of how I missed my kids when I played” (June 30, 2012) and “What a difference a yr makes. Last yr was eating glass and pacing night before game ... This yr I’m putting together Razor scooters 4 kids” (June 29, 2012).

Those tweets represented some of the emotions of disinvolved from professional football and the different adjustments one makes in this social process. However, in comparison to my interview data, tweets merely scratch the surface. The following interview quotes demonstrate how much more detail I gained concerning player retirement:

My life was not the same for about four years at least. Every May, June, I would be getting ready to play football. It was something lost in my life. I played thirteen years. I had a routine of doing stuff. So that was hard. I got into doing a radio show for the [media outlet], I was quite involved, then I went into scouting

for [a CFL team]. I was involved, but my life pattern was different, and it took a couple years to get out of that pattern of ... I got to get ready for training camp, I got to get ready for this, it is a game day ... it was just a mental set and thinking I've done something wrong. I wake up in the middle of the night thinking I got to get ready for the game, that sort of thing. (Jerry)

It's usually the hardest time for a player, I believe because the one thing you really miss is the camaraderie of your teammates. And when you retire, I still had a lot of teammates on that team that I played with and went to wars with and played a lot good football games with, and you miss that camaraderie. The game, I would say that I did miss some of the game because that's what I've been doing since I was six as a kid, and now you just like stop ... is emotionally hard. And I'm an emotional player, and at the same time it is something part of me, my DNA. It runs through me. (Roger)

A second limitation concerns the written and unwritten rules involved in using social media. Specifically, spouses of players would explain the potential dangers in tweeting something about football. Many of these women were privy to information that was not public knowledge, and they discussed how they were limited in what they could post online and what the player could post. Thus, a researcher should never rely only on Twitter because he/she is highly unlikely to obtain a complete picture of the social world he/she is studying. The following are interview quotes regarding the (un)written rules to using social media:

Now Joey always has to make sure that I don't say anything on Facebook that could be controversial.

Let's say we are watching a football game and someone throws a pick, I can't be like, fuck this guy sucks. Obviously, I know I can't say that. We are sort, there is no freedom of speech in that sense because someone ... people can tweet something like that, but I wouldn't and he won't. (Michelle)

I don't post things about Shawn's injury or about the team. I don't post that on any social media like Facebook or Twitter. You have to be very careful what information you say. When you are married to someone, they tell you a lot of things about the team, and that's not public knowledge. Those were some of the challenges that I learned to deal with that is maybe a little different than college. (Katie)

Oh yeah, I know that a couple of his teammates have done that before. Some of them were released I think. I think one of them took a picture of someone that was injured and then the other team finds out someone is injured, and I've heard of people being release for tweets, for sure. I think in training camp two years ago, and he wrote an apology or whatever, and I know that some of them have bashed certain cities or bashed French people in Montreal, and I know they have done that over Twitter before and I think they can get fined for it. I think the CFL has fined guys for that before. (Sara)

In addition to rules, I also realized that there was a status hierarchy among players in professional football, and that some players could post more freely than others. Many participants talked about how certain players were able to say more than others given their position on the field, years in the league, and performance. For example, veterans and retired

players might be able to tweet a negative opinion against something that would question the status quo in football where a younger, new player would not. For example, a recently retired player tweeted the following messages against the General Manager and coach of a particular team:

Really Ed Hervey? Calling out players personally as a GM? When a team is 1-8 + you point the finger. 4 should be pointed right back 'atcha! ... The locker room I know for a fact would be livid ... Good luck having the players play for "you" for the rest of the year. You have lost them ... The honorable thing Kavis Reed should do today is call a presser ... And shit can himself. (September 04, 2013)

It is far less likely that a rookie or someone new to the league would make controversial comments like the ones above. The social world of the CFL can and does place many limitations of what a player and his family can say publicly about his team. Many football families explained they would not post anything they thought could threaten players' careers, or the team, or in the league. Although Twitter only provides part(s) of the story, it is, nonetheless, a unique place to collect data and enrich the interview process.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated the advantages of incorporating Twitter into our methodological toolbox. I demonstrated how Twitter provides many different sources of data including, but not exclusively, tweets, newspaper articles, blog posts, and pictures. Using Twitter-generated data, I divided field notes into four

categories: (1) emerging themes; (2) relationships among professional athletes; (3) debates, issues, or controversies around professional sports; and (4) future interview questions. Tweets enabled me to better appreciate the meanings, experiences, emotions, situations, and relationships expressed by people involved in the CFL. Twitter became an invaluable resource for collecting secondary data on the participant before the interview process. I could draw on the interviewee's tweets to inform interview questions and, at times, use their tweets as probes to encourage conversation and elicit detailed descriptions.

When conducting traditional interviews, I was able to ask participants about their Twitter use and about Twitter use in professional sports, more generally. By incorporating interview data on Twitter use, I also discovered there are certain limitations to using Twitter-generated data—the unwritten rules players and their spouses followed and that, in some cases, CFL teams placed restrictions on what players could tweet. In this process, I realized that the status hierarchy in the CFL was mimicked on Twitter, giving some players and coaches more freedom to tweet their personal opinions on CFL matters than others. As such, researchers should be aware of any limitations and/or restrictions placed on members of a social world that limit what people can post on Twitter.

By examining the uses of Twitter-generated data into my methodological toolbox and comparing it with traditional interview data, I would agree with Murthy's (2012) statement,

In the case of Twitter, it may be intensifying pre-existing characteristics of an erosion of the private in

which more quotidian aspects of our lives are publicly shared. We learn about other people’s daily rituals, habits, happenings, and the places they visit. (p. 106)

In the case study of the CFL, the boundaries between online and offline are blurry and unclear. I found some players tweeted about their private lives by sharing their daily activities, photos of their families, and expressing their opinions. Twitter use among professional athletes should not be considered a “virtual” world but rather it is incorporating advanced modes of technology into their daily lives. Twitter’s prevalence in the social world of the CFL not only made advantageous to the research process but necessary. In some cases, Twitter use among players, coaches, and reporters has faded in the background of taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life. Even if members of the CFL do not use Twitter, they are affected by it because every team is represented on it and each team has a policy on the team’s use of Twitter.

In sum, this research contributes to our understanding of professional sports use of social media and

how Twitter can be advantageous to the research process. Further, ethnographers who are interested in studying a particular group, subculture, or social world can use social media to enrich their research projects. It provides the researcher with an avenue to collect data, record emerging themes, highlight relationships and forms of associations, draw attention to social problems, controversies, and debates, and help inform interview questions. Twitter provides another method for researcher’s to immerse himself/herself into the world of their research subject and gain intimate familiarity. Future studies need to address the ways social media can benefit data collection, but also if or how Twitter has been adopted by the social world under investigation.

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