When Nadir Mohamed, number two in the 2013 *Globe and Mail*’s top fifty influential people in Canadian sports, announced his retirement in the spring of 2013, there were no tributes or wails of dismay. There was nothing to match the outpourings that greeted Jarome Iginla’s departure from the Calgary Flames in a trade to the Pittsburgh Penguins that spring, or Daniel Alfredsson’s decision that July to sign with the Detroit Red Wings for the 2013–14 season after seventeen years with the Ottawa Senators.

Mohamed’s announcement that he would step down in early 2014 was barely noticed by Canada’s sports writers and broadcasters. Few sports fans across the country probably even know who he is. This anonymity in the Canadian sports landscape is shared by the co-occupant of the second-place slot on the *Globe* list, George Cope. Yet Mohamed, the former head of Rogers Communications Inc., and Cope, the current CEO of BCE Inc., are so influential that only NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman placed above them in the *Globe*’s ranking. The extent to which sports and broadcasting in Canada are now mutually dependent is further highlighted by the fact that five of the *Globe*’s top dozen most influential people in sports are broadcast executives from the CBC, CTV (owned by BCE), and Quebecor.

At the top of that list are executives at Rogers and BCE. Not only are these companies Canada’s largest and third-largest wireless and Internet service providers; they own the two major sports specialty TV channels, Sportsnet and TSN (and the French-language Réseau des Sports, RDS), as well as sports radio networks and, in the Rogers case, *Sportsnet Magazine*, the Canadian challenger to the
American magazine *Sports Illustrated*. BCE also owns the over-the-air television network CTV and its twenty-eight stations; more than thirty specialty channels; more than three dozen radio stations; dozens of websites, including the Sympatico.ca portal; and Dome Productions, a major television and mobile broadcast production house that produces coverage of sports and other events. Rogers owns the CITY-TV network and five multicultural OMNI television stations; fifty-five radio stations across Canada; and more than fifty consumer magazines and trade publications, including well-known titles such as *Maclean’s*, *Chatelaine*, and *Canadian Business*.

But the presence and influence of BCE and Rogers in Canadian sports extends far beyond their media activities to ownership of major professional teams in the country and the buildings and facilities where they play. While Rogers is the sole owner of the Toronto Blue Jays and their home, the Rogers Centre (formerly the Skydome), the two companies jointly paid $1.3 billion in 2012 to buy 75 percent of Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment. MLSE owns the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team, basketball’s Toronto Raptors, professional soccer’s Toronto FC, the Toronto Marlies American Hockey League team, Toronto’s Air Canada Centre, and the facilities where the soccer team and minor league hockey team play. It also owns specialty TV channels and assorted websites and social media sites dedicated to each of the major league teams; large sports bars in Toronto and Ottawa; and the $500 million Maple Leaf Square condominium, office, and commercial redevelopment of MLSE’s Air Canada Centre site in downtown Toronto.

It’s no stretch to suggest that between them, the two corporations control most of what Canadians read, listen to, and watch in sports. Their reach even extends beyond their sole and joint ownership of media and teams, BCE at the time also owned 15 percent of the *Globe and Mail* newspaper. *The Globe*, together with Torstar and Square Victoria Communications Group (the parent of Gesca Ltée., which owns *La Presse* and other Québec papers), owns the Canadian Press news service. Among Canada’s major media players, only newspaper owner Postmedia Network Canada Corporation, Shaw Communications Inc. (which owned Global TV), Quebecor (which would like to own an NHL team in Québec City), and the publicly owned CBC are outside the BCE-Rogers realm. The CBC has remained a significant presence in the sports world, primarily through its *Hockey Night in Canada* programming, but that ended in 2014.

The $5.2 billion, twelve-year deal that Rogers signed with the NHL in November 2013 will allow the CBC to keep Saturday night hockey until the end of the 2017–18 season, but it will simply take a feed of the game from Rogers, with Rogers controlling
all editorial content and scooping up all the advertising revenue. That leaves the public broadcaster with the 2014 World Cup soccer broadcast rights in Canada, the Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia, in 2014, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2016, although BCE and Rogers are also players here (despite CTV not winning those Olympic rights after owning Vancouver in 2010 and London in 2012). TSN and Sportsnet will be secondary Olympic broadcasters working in 2014 and 2016 with the CBC.

In mid-2013, Rogers was number two in sports programming in Canada but was gaining on the leader, TSN (owned by BCE), and was hoping to use the NHL contract to move into top spot. There are about 12 million subscribers to cable or satellite television in Canada, and about 9.1 million of them buy TSN, while 8.8 million subscribe to Sportsnet’s primary set of channels, with many viewers probably paying monthly for both channels as part of purchased bundles. Through the first few months of 2013, TSN had an average per-minute audience of about 145,000, while Sportsnet averaged about 96,000, a gain of 20 percent from a year earlier.1 Collectively, the two brought in about $500 million in revenue in 2012, with TSN turning a pre-tax profit of approximately $37 million, ahead of Sportsnet’s $22 million.2

Their battle for audiences has led to a fight for television rights. Rogers, of course, has exclusive rights to the Blue Jays. The fifty-fifty Rogers-BCE sharing of the MLSE deal means that Sportsnet and TSN split Maple Leaf games—as well as games involving Toronto’s National Basketball Association team, the Raptors—evenly. While an even split of games is a solution that one might expect from those most comfortable around the table of a corporate boardroom, it has created problems. The broadcasting split leaves fans in the dark, for instance, about which Leaf games are on which network and when. That’s a recipe for tension within MLSE that could escalate over time and could strain, or even break, the Rogers-BCE alliance of convenience.

Further strain is likely from the NHL deal. TSN thought it had an inside track for renewal and was shocked when the league and Rogers signed their exclusive agreement covering all media and giving Rogers sole rights to the NHL in Canada on television, radio, and mobile devices, as well as online. Sunday night hockey will join Saturday night, with weeknight games as well, on Sportsnet. TSN, which built its audience through a decade of NHL rights, will be reduced to carrying regional games involving a couple of Canadian teams, including the Ottawa Senators. In its first year, though, the deal didn’t look that great. Revenues failed to meet Rogers’ expectations although the company said it still made a 10 percent profit. Television ratings were also down for the first two months of the 2015-16 season, thanks in part to another struggling season for the Maple Leafs.
Meanwhile, fans will pay—probably a lot. The price that Sportsnet charges cable and satellite distributors will certainly rise. Once viewers have the option after March 2016 to buy single channels rather than the current bundle of channels expect Sportsnet to be much more expensive. A charge of ten to fifteen dollars a month doesn’t seem unrealistic, compared to the couple of dollars subscribers pay at the moment. Finally, Rogers wants to use the NHL to increase the number of people choosing Rogers as their mobile carrier for cellphones and tablets. Rogers would love to find a way to force anyone who wants to watch hockey on a mobile device to subscribe to its services. Indeed, it is already doing that. Its Game Centre Live package is available on smart phones, laptops, and tablets for about $250 a year, but only Rogers customers have access to the Game Plus mobile app and to home Internet features such as exclusive camera angles, multiple angle replays, postgame analysis, and behind-the-scenes details not available on Sportsnet. Bell filed a complaint to the broadcast regulator, claiming that this violates CRTC regulations, but the CRTC dismissed the complaint, stating that Rogers’s move was encouraging innovation. Bell’s real concern, of course, is that the exclusivity will drain subscribers from Bell to Rogers.

All of that leaves TSN much reduced but not quite empty-handed, since it retains a long-term deal with the Canadian Football League that covers the season and playoffs, including the ratings-winning Grey Cup game. It has also signed a ten-year agreement with Hockey Canada as exclusive broadcaster of international hockey, including the popular World Junior championship that runs annually in the end-of-year holiday season. TSN also has an agreement with the Canadian Curling Association to cover the national championships for men and women.

Rogers, too, is buying and creating content, such as the Grand Slam of Curling. The corporation also holds a substantial lead in radio audiences: Toronto’s Sportsnet 590 The FAN is the most listened-to sports station in the country. Online TSN is the clear leader in page views, while Rogers is integrating its Sportsnet Magazine writers into its online sites to catch up. After two years, Rogers says its magazine has approximately seventy thousand subscribers, twenty thousand less than Sports Illustrated in Canada.

In what might be called their coop-etition, or perhaps comp-eration, Rogers and BCE have two objectives. First, they hope that their sports channels and programming can help reverse, or at least slow down, the steady drop in the number of cable and/or satellite subscribers in Canada. Regular increases in the monthly cost of cable and satellite TV packages mean that some consumers cannot or no longer want to pay for both cable or satellite and Internet service at home. Faced with a choice
between television and Internet service, the latter (which is usually cheaper) consistently wins. That is helped by the growing popularity of online broadcasters such as Netflix and of television programming delivered through the Internet. For instance, in 2013, Rogers’s cable TV revenue declined from a year earlier, owing in part to the 3.9 percent year-over-year drop in the number of its cable customers.5

Sports can help reduce cable and satellite cancellations, since it is the last refuge of appointment television—television that viewers must watch when it is broadcast rather than at their convenience. That means larger audiences delivered to advertisers and more revenue for broadcasters. Viewers can now watch almost all programming, other than breaking news, at their convenience, not just when the program is initially broadcast. They have also moved beyond TV screens to smart phones, computers, and tablets—hence, the rise of Netflix, YouTube, and other online viewing platforms, which provide both legal and pirated programming that has drained TV audiences. That is not true, though, for sports. Fans want to watch the game live, not twelve hours or two days later, and they still watch primarily on television. Live coverage of the action in high definition on big-screen television helps promote everything from fantasy leagues and fan support to gambling, both legal and illegal.

In Canada, that is demonstrated categorically by fan devotion to the National Hockey League, even though it has been more than twenty years since a Canadian team, the Montreal Canadiens, last won the Stanley Cup, in 1993. Throughout the hundred-day player lockout by the league in 2012–13, which caused a shorted forty-eight-game (down from the normal eighty-two games) season that began in mid-January, prognosticators and public opinion pollsters all predicted league-television doom. Fans’ outrage at the third interruption of a season for a labour dispute since the mid-1990s would hurt ticket sales and TV audiences when the lockout finally ended, the fans proclaimed.6

So what happened when pucks finally dropped? The league had one of its best years ever, both in ticket sales and TV ratings. Twenty-two of the thirty NHL teams, including all seven in Canada, matched or exceeded pre-lockout average attendance, and four teams had attendance that exceeded 100 percent of their arena’s capacity.7 In the important US television market, 1.5 million viewers, on average, watched games on NBC, NBCSN, and CNBC, the largest audience for hockey since 1997, and almost 20 percent above 2012 levels. The Stanley Cup finals, in which the Chicago Blackhawks defeated the Boston Bruins in six games, had a 3.3 rating and an average of 5.8 million viewers on NBC and the NBC Sports Network in the United States. In Canada, audience numbers were strong from the moment the
season started on 19 January 2013, even though the last Canadian team was eliminated in the second of four rounds of playoffs.

As with hockey’s Stanley Cup, it has been more than twenty years since the Toronto Blue Jays won the World Series. That was also their last playoff appearance. A major rebuilding of the team in 2013, accompanied by loud and repeated pre-season media predictions of World Series potential, paid off for Rogers, although the team’s on-field performance did not match the media-generated pre-season hype. From a low point of an average of 20,068 fans per home game at the Rogers Centre in 2010, twenty-sixth best in the thirty-team league, the Blue Jays were twelfth best in average home attendance in 2013. The average crowd of 31,315 for the eighty-one home games was still just 64 percent of the Rogers Centre’s capacity, but it was a 50 percent increase from four years earlier. No doubt, that increase is in part due to blanket coverage of the team on Rogers’s Sportsnet television, radio, online, and magazine outlets. Rogers creates a harmonious commercial circle by spending to improve the team, which is then promoted through more coverage across more of its radio, television, magazine, and online outlets, leading to bigger home game crowds and larger TV and online audiences—all of which means more revenue and presumably greater profit for Rogers. In 2015 that paid off as the Blue Jays returned to baseball’s post-season playoffs, selling out 20 of their last 21 home games and with season attendance of 2.8 million—the best since 1993. Sportsnet also reported its highest ratings ever, which translated into more advertising revenue.

Sports programming isn’t just the best hope for holding onto existing cable and satellite customers. It is also the key to revenue growth for Rogers and BCE through their individual wireless and Internet services. The goal is to use ownership of the exclusive rights to televise hockey, baseball, football, basketball, and other sports to encourage customers to subscribe to that conglomerate’s Internet or wireless services if they want to watch sports on anything more portable than a TV screen. But how far can each corporation go in restricting access to sports coverage online and on mobile devices to their own wireless subscribers? Determining what is fair and what is anti-competitive and then enforcing fair access and competition is the challenge faced by the federal broadcast regulator, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). At the moment, a wireless provider can restrict to it own subscribers only content created exclusively for the mobile market. The pressure to broaden the definition of what can be offered only to subscribers has already started with Game Plus being part of the Rogers NHL deal. It’s a battle against the regulator that Rogers will probably win, since the CRTC has neither the history, nor the reputation, nor even the ability to enforce its own rulings.
One positive consequence of the focus on sports programming is that it offers opportunities for more coverage of sports that now get minimal or no coverage, except in the quadrennial lead-up to the Olympics. Television exposure and the ability to deliver audiences to advertisers and sponsors can provide more money for Olympic sports, teams, and athletes that now struggle for public attention and support.

The biggest winner from all of this could be the Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) system, which in 2013 signed a six-year agreement for Sportsnet to broadcast its major championships, starting with football’s Vanier Cup. Basketball and men’s and women’s hockey will also be featured in the first year of the deal as Sportsnet gives national exposure to thirteen CIS events. By the final year of the agreement, as many as twenty-seven separate events could be covered by Sportsnet. It is an opportunity to provide national exposure to university athletes and sports, giving those competitors more recognized names and perhaps increasing the often pathetically small crowds for Canadian university sports and championships.

The CIS-Sportsnet agreement is a major part of the CIS expansion plan promoted by the group’s then CEO, Pierre Lafontaine, formerly of Swimming Canada. Other elements include a commitment by universities across the country to raise the profile of their teams and events in their local markets, piggybacking on the national publicity and exposure Lafontaine hoped the Sportsnet deal would provide for teams and athletes. Lafontaine believed that a closer relationship with Canada’s Olympic athlete development system is equally important in building the profile of university sports across the country. Keeping the best university athletes in Canada rather than seeing them head to the United States for sports scholarships, and supporting them here at home with high-level coaching, competition, and media coverage is his prescription for raising the visibility of university sports in Canada, building on the successes of the eleven thousand athletes and seven hundred coaches at the fifty-four schools in the CIS. Long-overdue attention to a wide range of university sports in Canada from the mainstream media would be a beneficial result of the competition between the two conglomerates for sports properties.

Such benefits, though, seem unlikely to outweigh the drawbacks for fans and the public from the vertical integration of sports media and the teams they cover. The reality of one or two conglomerates owning the team, its broadcasters, and the media outlets that talk about sports—and also broadcasting the games and related information to fans—creates unprecedented opportunities for conflicts of interest. Those conflicts seem likely to be at the core of how Canadians communicate about sports in the years ahead, shaping public perceptions of teams, sports, and
athletes with media coverage designed primarily for the commercial benefit of the conglomerate owner. In the face of that pressure, can sports media maintain the independent reporting, commentary, and analysis that have traditionally been at the heart of the media’s role in all aspects of Canadian society, including sports? Or will broadcast, print, and online sports media slowly morph into becoming primarily agents to generate fan interest and audiences and promote sales of tickets and team merchandise to benefit their parent conglomerate?

Rogers is at the forefront of how such a transformation may occur. It clearly explained its objectives in a June 2013 news release that announced the relaunch of The Score, its recently purchased specialty TV channel, as Sportsnet 360. The news release described the channel as

integrated into the overall Sportsnet brand via cross-promotional and content-sharing across Sportsnet’s additional assets on television, radio, print, digital and social media. Sportsnet’s brand tagline, Fuelled by Fans, which builds on Sportsnet’s objective to fuel the passion of Canadians and provides one source that delivers sports fans what they want, wherever and whenever, will also be part of the Sportsnet 360 sub-brand.11

An incident in mid-summer 2013 provided a taste of the conflicts that may soon dominate sports coverage. It involved a dispute between a Blue Jays baseball player and a former player, now a commentator on Rogers’s Toronto all-sports radio station, Sportsnet 590 The FAN. The chronology is straightforward. Gregg Zaun, a former major league catcher who had spent some time playing for the Blue Jays, criticized the current Jays catcher, J. P. Arencibia, harshly and repeatedly in Zaun’s radio appearances on The FAN. Zaun picked on Arencibia’s low batting average (only slightly more than .200), frequent strikeouts, and inability to throw out almost anyone trying to steal second base.

Arencibia, a frequent presence on social media, responded by telling his more than 143,000 Twitter followers that he would reply the next day on The FAN. On the air, he conceded that his season hadn’t been great but went after Zaun, saying that he had never come to the dressing room to speak with Arencibia and instead had simply attacked his performances on the radio. Arencibia then added that Zaun was “a person who used performance enhancing drugs” during his career. (Zaun had been mentioned as a possible user in a 2007 report about drug use in baseball, but he denied it at the time, and nothing has ever been proven.) Zaun responded on The FAN, saying that Arencibia’s comments were “over the line,” adding: “He may come to regret those at some point.”12
The National Post (not owned by Rogers) described the ensuing on-air discussion on Sportsnet 590 The FAN following Zaun’s retort: “The Rogers talk-show host asked the Rogers baseball analyst whether he might sue the Rogers baseball player over comments made on a Rogers radio station. The Rogers baseball analyst said he didn’t know. He did not sound particularly keen on the idea. Nor would it likely get much traction among the folks who run the Rogers hall of mirrors.”

Social media quickly escalated the Zaun-Arencibia spat into the major story of the day for some of reporters who regularly cover the team. Then, just as quickly as it had emerged as a controversy, the social media world moved on. Is this hall of mirrors a preview of how the Canadian media will cover professional sports in the future? Should sports fans care when the same conglomerate is the employer of the interviewer, of the ex-player baseball commentator, and of the player currently under criticism, as well as the owner of the team in question, of the station on which the exchange is broadcast and the rebuttal promoted, and of the stadium that hosted the player scrum (facilitated by the team it owns) intended to clear the air? Was this a real dispute or just a sideshow designed to distract attention from a team that is underperforming? Perhaps it was manufactured to stoke controversy in the media, with the hope of keeping fans coming to the Rogers Centre and ensuring that media continued to talk about the team despite its failure to perform and win consistently.

The Arencibia-Zaun contretemps in that Rogers hall of mirrors saw each event bouncing off the wall to another mirror mostly contained within the hall, where the outcome could be fairly easily managed. Pierre Karl Péladeau and Quebecor—which owns Québec’s largest newspaper, Le Journal de Montréal; the province’s major private TV network TVA; and the dominant mobile, Internet, and cable provider Vidéotron—could have their own hall of mirrors if they ultimately succeed in bringing an NHL team back to Québec City. In both cases (the Arencibia-Zaun conflict and the Quebecor plan), the outsiders TSN and its French-language sister RDS would be free to cover the story, ignore it, or say whatever they wanted about the issue, but what if this was a story about the Toronto Maple Leafs and not the Blue Jays? Then Rogers and BCE would be equally affected and would have equal influence over all the elements of the story, as Rogers did in the Jays case. They would also have a joint interest in shaping the story to maximize any commercial and promotional benefits while minimizing or eliminating any reputation and brand damage. Their joint hall of mirrors could then determine what Canadians learn about a story, which reporters and broadcasters cover it, what is said by whom, where and how it is reported, who is or isn’t quoted, how it is analyzed,
what leads are pursued by reporters, what leads and information are edited out of coverage, what assessments are made about the significance of the story, and what access media not owned by the conglomerates may have to the story.

Such a self-contained media world works in several ways. First, media organizations concentrate coverage on sports within their conglomerate. For example, in its role as a Blue Jays broadcaster, Sportsnet devotes a huge amount of daily and weekly airtime to the Jays, starting weeks before the season begins. It is safe to assume that in the pursuit of promoting the team, coverage eats up airtime that might have been devoted to other sports and issues. Its competitor TSN holds the rights to the CFL, so it is no surprise that TSN’s popular SportsCentre newscast and game highlights program, which is repeated hourly each evening and the following morning, plays up the Toronto Argonauts and the rest of the CFL, but not the Blue Jays. TSN regularly assigned just one overworked journalist to write stories, shoot video, and blog about all aspects of the Blue Jays and their games, despite the fact that home game attendance and TV ratings are consistently higher for baseball than for the CFL in the Toronto area. But that external environment is only dimly reflected, if at all, by each conglomerate’s mirrors. If TSN devoted significant daily coverage time to the Blue Jays, it would risk pushing audiences to its competitor Sportsnet, undermining TSN’s commercial interests as well as those of BCE. That operates in reverse for Sportsnet, with its limited coverage of the CFL compared to the programming time spent on everything Blue Jays.

The conglomerates can also control which media have how much access to athletes. There is no guarantee that in future, reporters from all news organizations will continue to have equal postgame and between-game access to players for interviews. At some point, the broadcast and print members of the same conglomerate that owns the team may start to receive preferential treatment. To some degree, that already happens, with “exclusive” stories given to media within the same family. Conglomerate cross-interests can also be seen in the questions journalists ask. Do those reporters who work for Rogers-owned outlets, for example, ask questions of Blue Jays players in a more sympathetic way than those who aren’t Rogers employees? Related to that, will those who ask tough questions from external news organizations slowly be edged out the door and denied contact with players and management? How quickly and substantially will related media report or assess dissension or controversy within the team? For example, will Rogers reporters pursue a negative Blue Jays story as aggressively as those outside the conglomerate, or might upper management suggest soft-pedalling things so as not to damage their collective commercial interests?
The mirrors can also be selective, choosing not to reflect some things at all. How likely is it, for instance, that a reader of *Sportsnet Magazine* would find an article within its covers that is critical in a substantive way of Sportsnet TV programming, coverage decisions, or commentators? The same question could be asked about how critically the *Globe and Mail* assessed the activities and performance of TSN and its on-air talent, during the time that BCE had ownership interests in both. What constraints do reporters and writers at each publication either place upon themselves or face from their management when writing and reporting about sports broadcasting and broadcasters who operate under the same corporate umbrella? The other side of this issue is also worth exploring. Does the extent of coverage that each publication devotes to its broadcast partner primarily reflect fair news judgment and audience interests, or marketing decisions?

Such changes in how sports are covered in Canada will be incremental. It will not be easy to pinpoint exactly how reporting and coverage is increasingly managed and manipulated from one month or one season to the next. Messages delivered to audiences are shaped by what is covered and what is ignored and by who is providing the coverage. In many cases, trying to uncover the subtle biases means identifying what is missing: questions not asked, reporters not assigned, players and management not available for comment, little or no time or space for negative stories, and the replacement of criticism by a consistently positive spin on everything from interviews to overall coverage. Whatever changes Rogers and Bell introduce as the years pass should be viewed as just one part of a much broader effort led by the professional sports leagues themselves to layer a public relations and promotion veneer over sports and the journalism flowing from it.

Almost universal access to the Internet means the mainstream media is no longer the gatekeeper controlling what and when fans learn about their favourite players, teams, and sports. Athletes can tweet, fans can blog, and journalists can be made almost irrelevant, or so it seems. The league can circumvent the mainstream media and go directly to the fans with what looks, sounds, and reads like journalism but is really skillfully disguised public relations and promotion. Welcome to the worlds of NHL.com, MLB.com, NFL.com, and NBA.com. Each of these sites is massive (Major League Baseball—MLB.com—is rumoured to be valued at US$1 billion) and covers games with its own crew of reporters, some of whom have been hired full-time to work for the league site from the shrinking sports departments of mainstream media in Canada and the United States. MLB.com, for example, assigns one of its own reporter-employees to the home team and one to the visiting team for each major league game scheduled every night. The two reporters file
to MLB.com after the game, just like real journalists. For every game every night, the sites provide running game scores and pitch-by-pitch descriptions, final scores, league standings, game video highlights, and a flood of statistics for fans and fantasy league players. The sites also sell tickets and merchandise for all the league’s teams (or they direct readers to individual team sites through online links) and offer subscribers various live online viewing packages up to and including buying online access to every major league game played every night.

The league sites provide everything many fans think they need, so much so that some fans abandon mainstream media. The sites contain a wealth of information, but they aren’t journalism. They don’t regularly hold players, managers, and owners accountable for actions and decisions on and off the playing surface, nor do they challenge accepted wisdom about the sport and its personalities. They don’t highlight issues that could undermine the commercial success and viability of the sport, the league, or its individual teams. For instance, will MLB.com be the media outlet that breaks a story about players using performance-enhancing drugs, or will it follow, somewhat belatedly, when the number of stories done by others on a controversial issue makes acknowledging that issue unavoidable? Will NFL.com be on the forefront of examining head injuries in football—the damage they have done and the length of time and degree to which team management and physicians have understood the risks players faced? Will NHL.com commission and promote a study on how often team physicians prescribe painkillers and how much players use them? How extensively will any of these sites look at issues such as labour relations or gambling in professional sports?

As joint owners through their leagues, the teams are the direct beneficiaries of the success of these sites. These league-operated websites may even grow more influential as a source for “news,” as mainstream news organizations continue to cut costs in the face of shrinking advertising revenue. This is particularly true for newspapers and their websites that have, over the years, been the mainstay in providing coverage of local teams. Declining revenue means that newspaper owners are constantly looking for ways to save money. If a team is doing well, then the local media will be on the bandwagon, covering the games, telling the stories, and staying on top of daily developments. But the media can be fickle, particularly when budgets are tight and when things turn around and a former championship contender becomes an also-ran. If there is less and less audience interest in a team that plays poorly and slides down the standings, a cost-cutting news organization may decide to save money by covering only home games. The political equivalent is the private debate that occurred within news organizations before the 2011 federal
election about whether they should save money by sending reporters with New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton for only the last two weeks of the five-week election campaign. They wisely chose not to follow that route: in that election, the NDP achieved a historic victory by becoming the Official Opposition.

Retrenching to covering only home games would turn the consistent coverage of a team and league over to the hall of mirrors. Team owners have a commercial reason for ensuring that all games are featured on the media they own. But, for the reasons already specified, that sort of sports coverage is different from sports coverage provided by media that have no direct connection to the team. Reportage by media affiliated with teams themselves is inevitably compromised, caught in conflicts of interest in which the mirrors shape and distort coverage, turning journalism into promotion and public relations.

To some, none of this may matter. After all, it is only a game, but sports and its impact in communities across the country run much deeper than just what happens on the field or ice. It is very big business, and not just for the billions of dollars involved. Individual athletes, teams, and the sports they play can give a community its personality and character. They create a desirable image that allows people who may have nothing else in common to come together around a shared goal or objective, to see themselves reflected in their sporting heroes and their successes and failures. At the same time, professional sports teams, arenas, and stadiums are major employers in their communities. Sports teams also make demands for municipal, provincial, or federal subsidies or tax concessions and want communities to build arenas or stadiums for them. Public reaction to those requests can be shaped by the image created by and for the team. The owners know that and understand how to use it to their benefit. Sports fans and the general public need to be aware of that as well. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, communicating about sports will be increasingly shaped by the various halls of mirrors created by vertically integrated conglomerates as they challenge, pressure, and hope to replace independent journalism and its traditions. How this is happening, who is doing it and why, and what sports fans are losing in the process will be at the centre of how Canadians communicate about sports in the years ahead.

NOTES
13 Ibid.
14 As a side note, BCE also owns 15 percent of the *Globe and Mail* newspaper.