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Author

Eschrich, Joey

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**“They Run, They Sweat, We Write”:
ESPN’s Bill Simmons, Sports Journalism, and Intersectional Identities**

Joey Eschrich, Women and Gender Studies, Arizona State University

Bill Simmons, also known as “The Sports Guy,” has been perhaps the most prolific and polarizing figure in US sports journalism since joining ESPN, the “worldwide leader in sports,” in 2001. Simmons is the most visible representative of a huge contemporary shift in sports journalism, which is increasingly leaving behind the traditional, serious-minded “reporterly” mode associated with print media and turning toward the growing influence of a free-form aesthetic, derived from the writing style of non-professional bloggers. This style treats sports as a component of pop culture, rather than a sanctified space apart from it. I argue that the astounding popularity of Simmons’ work, which includes columns for ESPN.com, audio podcasts, television documentaries, a Twitter feed, two *New York Times*-bestselling books, and until recently a monthly column in *ESPN: The Magazine*, is a result of his particular style of mobilizing his intersectional identity as an upper-middle class white male sports fanatic. Simmons’ journalistic work is more comprehensible and legible as the demonstration of a particular identity that he models and offers to his fans than as a literary exercise or as a means to deliver information and analysis. The Simmons phenomenon models a new mode of sports journalism production and consumption that is not built on insider information or authority but on the construction of a unique, immersive identity projected by the writer and shared in by his or her fans. Following on this point, I suggest that Simmons’ particular identity is attractive to sports fans because it offers a palatable way for them to define and experience themselves as white and white-collar,

both of which are fraught positions in the sports world and the media complex that surrounds it.

Although I have been working critically with Simmons' material for about a year, and have been a dedicated fan for over five years, he continues to mystify me, and to teach me and trouble me about myself as a reader and as a white male of a certain class background. The main problem for the critic, as we will see, is the enormous amount of content he produces, and on a virtually continuous basis. As I've tried to theorize about the Simmons phenomenon, I've been pulled in too many directions to systematize it in a way that respects the material and represents it fairly and coherently. I'm hoping the feedback and ideas that I encounter during this conference will help to provide further direction and focus. I will start by explaining who Bill Simmons is and characterizing his unique style, because both areas are fundamental to the arguments that I will make about his fans and their possible relationships with him and his work.

Bill Simmons is a child of privilege. He grew up primarily in the Boston suburbs and in suburban Connecticut. He attended the College of the Holy Cross, then earned an MA in print journalism from Boston University. After brief postcollegiate stints as a bartender and a low-level sportswriter for *The Boston Herald*, Simmons put his life savings into starting his own website, BostonSportsGuy.com, early in the internet years. His site, though initially only available to AOL subscribers, became an early internet sensation, and grew steadily until Simmons' recruitment to ESPN. Today, The Sports Guy is arguably the most popular individual in the ever-expanding juggernaut of digital-age sports media: his podcast is

consistently the most-downloaded sports show on iTunes, he has over 1.1 million followers on his Twitter account (Oprah has 3 million), his most recent book, *The Book of Basketball*, hit number one among *New York Times* bestsellers in the nonfiction category, and his columns draw over 1 million unique visitors per month to ESPN.com.

The most remarkable element of Simmons' style, whether he is writing or podcasting, is the vast length of his work. His columns generally run from 4-7000 words and take up to 45 minutes to read through. His podcasts frequently have to be split into two parts because of bandwidth limits. They have been up to an hour and 45 minutes long, but mainly cluster around an hour. His book, *The Book of Basketball*, released in 09, is 736 pages long and contains at least 400 footnotes. On the ESPN show *SportsNation*, the book was shot from a distance of 25 feet with a 9mm pistol. The bullet was stopped by page 642. Simmons' large fan following is especially remarkable, then, in view of the time commitment necessary to participate fully in his universe.

A second Simmons hallmark is his adoption of a fan's perspective, that of an alienated outsider, as opposed to the insider informant role assumed by traditional sports journalists. Simmons avoids locker rooms, press boxes, and interviews with coaches and players. He sacrifices access in order to retain an Everyman perspective and a continued zeal for his subject, since in his opinion most athletes have to become "huge jerks" to succeed. The "fan's perspective" is best captured in Simmons' frequent "running diaries" of major sporting events, where he writes hundreds of time-stamped entries throughout the event and posts them as a column, talking about what he is eating, which channels he

switches to during commercials, when he hits the bathroom, what his wife and dogs are doing in the living room, and so forth. Going along with the fan's perspective is the way that Simmons incorporates his personal life into his work. His podcasts, in lieu of celebrity or athlete guests, often feature hour-long conversations with his childhood friends or college roommates. Through his journalistic output, we get a sense of Simmons as a private person, as a son and husband, and most importantly as a buddy. Simmons encourages this type of engagement with his frequent "mailbag" columns, in which he publishes emails he has received from readers and responds to them.

Finally, Simmons' work displays a startling degree of sports knowledge and pop culture literacy, and it demands a similar type of expertise from readers. Simmons' columns are difficult to read if you do not watch a lot of television and several different sports. However, this is not sufficient; readers need to have a working knowledge of sports statistics and history, as well as a cultural memory that stretches back to the early 1980s. It took me a few months of Simmons columns to acquire the knowledge base needed to decipher all of the references and jokes. Simmons is notorious for his far-fetched analogies between sports and pop culture – well-known instances include a character-by-character comparison between *Beverly Hills 90210* and the 2004 Boston Red Sox and an analogy between Kobe Bryant and the main character of the film *Teen Wolf*.

My argument about Simmons is built on a certain interpretation of intersectionality theory, to make a harsh transition from *Teen Wolf*. I interpret intersectionality as a model for the composition of all identities, not just those associated with multiply-burdened

groups such as women of color. Thus, Simmons' mobilization of his upper-middle class background, his whiteness, and his maleness constitutes an intersectional identity. This identity is emergent – that is, it exceeds the boundaries of the categories that contribute to its formation. The emergent quality of Simmons' identity, and the particular ways that he constructs and uses it in his work, allows it to be realistic, attractive, and livable – it can be the foundation of his appeal as a journalist, and it can be an identity that is to some extent adopted, lived out, or participated in by his fans. The identity that Simmons creates and welcomes us into fosters a closeness that only works because he seems like a real person, drawing on the intersections of his class, race, and gender but not confined to them.

Simmons' fans not only imagine him as a buddy; they recognize their own identities in the one he projects, and can assimilate themselves into the framework that he provides. This framework is especially effective because it is immersive: the time commitment required to be literate with his texts, the immensity of his output, and the degree of specialized insider knowledge necessary to participate in the "Sports Guy's World" makes a temporal and intellectual space in which his fans can be part of an identity, not just read information or a "take" by a traditional sportswriter. Simmons has said that he has no more credentials than his fans, and he offers neither insider analysis nor breaking news. Instead, he provides and orchestrates an identity framework through which an endless, constant flow of sports and pop culture texts and news events can be processed.

The particular identity that Simmons openly projects – that of a brash, well-educated upper-middle class white male – is likely attractive to his followers because of how it relates

to the character of the mainstream sports world and its related media industry. Sports writing has traditionally been associated with a blue-collar social identity and aggressive working-class masculinity, and the most popular sports tend to feature primarily non-white athletes, while the press corps and audience are largely comprised of white males. Sports fandom therefore involves identity strain in the case of the white, white-collar viewer, who has to engage in a masquerade of blue-collar masculine attitudes and behaviors while simultaneously dealing with anxieties about racial difference. Simmons' writing and the identity framework into which he welcomes his readers allows fans to participate in palatable forms of whiteness and class privilege while still retaining their status as legitimate sports fans.

In the case of a palatable whiteness, Simmons incorporates an awareness and acknowledgement of the racial dynamics of sports fandom and his own apparently excruciating whiteness into his identity. Discussing race in sports films, Simmons writes:

THREE of...[the four greatest sports movies of all time] undeniably have racist undertones: "Hoosiers," "Rocky" and "Field of Dreams." The first two revolve around a white underdog toppling an invincible black champ; the third completely ignored a half-century of indefensible prejudice against minorities in Major League Baseball. Even worse, I loved all three movies for years and years and would watch any of them right now if they came on. Does this mean I should be writing this column with a white hood on? I can't come to grips with this. Let's just move on.

Here, Simmons employs a self-reflexive strategy to acknowledge the racial dynamics around sports culture and his position within it as a white man, without confronting his fans with any disruptive systematic critique of social identity or justice. However, in the same year, in *The Book of Basketball*, Simmons admirably explores the ways that racism in the mid-

twentieth century distorted the structure of pro basketball and now damages historians' ability to accurately rank players. Yet turning back into problematic territory, Simmons will often interrupt his discussions of racial politics in basketball by remarking that he is "too white to be writing about this." So in both cases, Simmons' establishment of a palatable white identity depends on reflexively pointing to whiteness as an uncomfortable factor in sports fandom, then distancing the self from racial issues.

Simmons' address of his and his fans' white-collar status within the blue-collar universe of sports journalism is a bit less fraught, but equally crucial to his appeal. Simmons' highly digressive, loose blog-type aesthetic contributes to an ironic mode of address that he couples with sports and culture literacy to create an intertextual, intellectualized mode of sports talk. Blue-collar sports journalism keys on its appeal to tough masculine styles, but Simmons eschews this posture and revels in being hip and educated, in writing about sports in a way that proves his linguistic virtuosity and mastery of specialized knowledge. Simmons' strategy is therefore to create an alternative mode of legitimacy for sports fans, one that takes advantage not of their aggressive masculinity, but instead of their potentially effeminizing elevated class status and the educational and intellectual advantages associated with it. With Simmons, the pressure is off in terms of legitimacy for middle and upper class sports fans: in the Sports Guy's World, statistical wizardry, critical engagement with media texts, and male anxieties played for self-reflexive laughs can all be integral parts of a mode of sports fandom that is culturally valued and even prized.

I don't intend to offer Simmons up as a savior for these poor advantaged white male sports fans – in constructing an identity framework, more people may be excluded than included. But instead of rushing to critique, I've tried to step back and understand why Simmons is useful to his fans, how he serves them, and always, why I still get so excited every time a new column or podcast is posted online. Simmons provides a way for us to use intersectionality to focus on inclusions and convergences rather than oppressions and divisions. My early writing on Simmons reflects my hasty impulse to distance myself from the identity I saw him projecting. Through my continued research on and fascination with his work, though, I've found that studying intersectional identities requires a careful consideration of the ways that we are entangled with them, and how we depend upon them.