

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## *Internet-fueled media job losses now cut into muscle of baseball coverage*

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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The relentless march of the internet and its hypnotic I-devices – gobbling up old-school jobs and not replacing them with a commensurate number of new-age positions – finally cut into the muscle of Chicago baseball coverage.

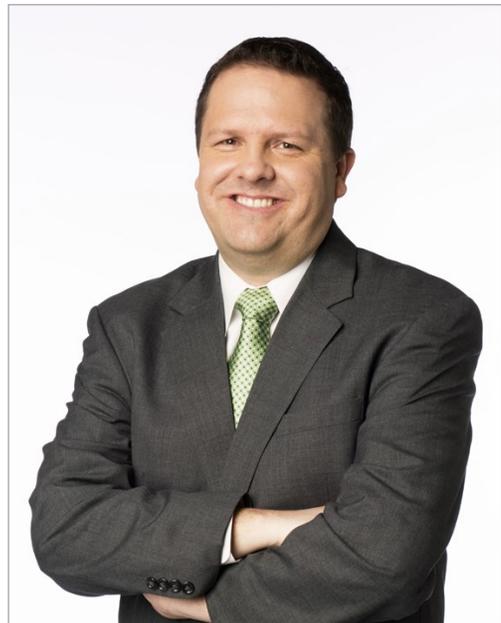
Most fans don't really care how the media operates. They just want their ballgames broadcast and (now) streamed. And if they are more than casual fans wearing team apparel for their once- or twice-annual ballpark trips, a pre-game preview and post-game analysis are also appreciated. They don't tend to be too discriminating in who originates that content.

But they should. Follow the logic and history here.

White Sox fans have one less experienced “insider” to explain Rick Hahn's rebuilding program. Dan Hayes, who arrived five years ago from San Diego to cover the Sox for NBC Sports Chicago, has been swept up in a second round of layoffs for the suddenly troubled regional sports channel.

I can deduce why Hayes got the gate while none of NBC Sports Chicago's (formerly CSN Chicago) Chicago team reporters went untouched, for now. Interest in the Sox – which possess a smaller, more geographically compact fan base than the Cubs anyway – is at a low ebb due to years of mediocrity and the resulting complete rebuilding. Sox-oriented ratings and revenue generated by less-valuable advertising are down.

The Cubs' similar tear-down in 2012-14 cost the franchise its 56-year run on WGN-Radio, which look a bath on revenue and ratings amid the on-field downslide. Prompted by then-station boss Jim DeCastro, WGN out one year too early before the team's abrupt revival in 2015.



**Dan Hayes**

Interestingly, both former Cubs GM Larry Himes and president Andy MacPhail said they avoided complete rebuilding programs due to the economic hits. Himes said Tribune Co. bosses knew WGN-TV and radio would be hurt badly, while MacPhail proclaimed the Cubs already had taken too many “broadsides” to withstand complete rebuilding in the mid-1990s.

Hayes’ forced departure is the first layoff of a traveling baseball writer for a downtown Chicago media outlet. Normally the baseball media working at big legacy outlets are kind of embedded. They’re considered vital content producers for their outlets’ daily output. Newspapers and broadcast outlets have cut their sports generalists, backup writers and stringer budgets. College and high school coverage have been slashed or eliminated altogether.

### **Core sports’ reporters previously untouched**

But the outlets’ core baseball, football, basketball and hockey beat reporters have gone untouched. NBC Sports surely was not going to cut their Bears, Bulls and Blackhawks reporters. The Bears are a universal interest, even if the average fan’s knowledge is skin-deep and office pool-oriented. The cable outlet also was not going to touch in-season Bulls and Blackhawks coverage. Despite their bottom-of-the-barrel status amid their own rebuilding program, the Bulls still have considerable across-the-board appeal to all Chicago-area socio-economic and ethnic groups. The Hawks built up a good base of interest through three NHL titles between 2010 and 2015.

Hayes’ departure meant the Rubicon has been crossed, though. Can anyone drawing a downtown media paycheck covering a sports beat feel safe anymore?

So why should the sports consumer be concerned? Sure, it’s bad that jobs are being eliminated in any field. That flies against the statistical trend of continued employment gains in the economy since the close of 2009, the official end of the Great Recession. In reality, the majority of those jobs are low-end service jobs or high-end positions that require specific training and experience, much of it in health care and tech.

If the baseball fan wants to know why Joe Maddon works his pitchers like 1969-vintage Leo Durocher in the playoffs or how Hahn calibrates the promotion of the good prospects he has squirreled away, you’d want experienced reporters who can go beyond the choreographed press conferences and media availabilities that frame daily baseball coverage. Worse yet, players now often bypass the middlemen media with announcements in their Twitter accounts or the web site The Players Tribune. But the latter lack objective answers posed by good questions from reporters.

### **Pre-packaged video next?**

You don’t want just the company line. Cynics in the pressbox have long predicted the owners really want the media out of the ballpark, with pre-packaged videos and other heavily-controlled releases of information disseminated for public consumption in lieu of direct access.

Gone are the days a reporter can kick back in Jim Riggleman’s office, notepad at rest and recorder turned off, and take the measure of the manager. No one can plumb the

mind of hipster Maddon one on one about why he rolls the clock back to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century pitcher handling when the heat is really on in October/November.

Yet the resourceful or motivated reporter can get around the increasingly choking control of team officials, by forging relationships with still-communicative players and agents, the latter long traffickers of news of pending transactions.

If more people in Hayes' position are shown the door, what is left are reporters for a mere handful of newspapers and broadcast outlets. Continuing to cover every team, home and road, will be MLB.com, which produces a wonderful multi-media product, yet cannot tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth as an adjunct of Major League Baseball. While MLB.com is thriving, other large and regional on-line sites set up to cover baseball at AOL, ESPN, Fox Sports, Yahoo! and other companies have either shut down completely or considerably cut back.

Countless blogs are authored by hobbyists and fans, who receive little or no compensation for their work. They support themselves from non-journalism jobs. They generate a lot of heat, but not the same amount of light. Opinions are now a dime a dozen, in line with the pay rate for the majority of on-line authors. But they cannot speak to the newsmakers themselves as team gatekeepers blithely ignore a steady decline in original baseball coverage in maintaining outdated media access policies. Chicago-area FM radio and all but one suburban newspaper have long pulled out of covering the Cubs and Sox. Meanwhile, the TV revenue bubble that has helped fuel baseball's prosperity could burst in a few years.

Hayes is a good guy, a decent man in a very political business. I teased him about his (mostly) clean-cut appearance. That certainly helped when he made live appearances on Sox telecasts to chat with Hawk Harrelson, Steve Stone and Jason Benetti.

### **Lots of good people at NBC Sports Chicago**

The Chicago Baseball Museum has long had a good relationship with NBC Sports Chicago. Veteran producers Sarah Lauch and Ryan McGuffey – who have mantles-full of Emmy Awards – are as the late Jerome Holtzman said, good people to know in a long day's march. I wish them well in a diminished company. In the same breath, it's painful to see the likes of Hayes, production chief Jim Corno, Jr. – son of the late longtime boss of his regional network – and veteran on-camera personality Chris Boden leave amid the continual cuts.

A depression in jobs amid a so-called recovery elsewhere has settled over media, book publishing and now retail. Our future will be full of robots and jobs-light sites for information and ordering goods, with people impersonally connected by texts and Facebook. No man should be on an island, but we're getting close.



**On-air talent David Kaplan (center), flanked by Emmy Award-winning producers Ryan McGuffey and Sarah Lauch, remain at NBC Sports Chicago. But waves of layoffs have cut into coverage muscle.**

If you're a baseball fan – or root for any sport – you are not advantaged by the latest news from NBC Sports Chicago. You should be concerned. The consuming of your spare-time passions is affected.

Enjoying free hot dogs in the pressbox, as Bears coach John Fox has claimed, is not the biggest perk enjoyed by media; media meals are no longer free in baseball, basketball and hockey venues. Whatever access remains to players, coaches and front-office honchos is the top privilege. And through that prism, your valuable time and increasing amounts of money spent on tickets and concessions can be justified. Further cut down or even eliminate that window, and you're flying nearly blind.