



Covering Yourself? Journalists and the Bowl Championship Series

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In 2004, the Associate Press sent a cease-and-desist letter to Bowl Championship Series (BCS) coordinator Kevin Weiberg requesting that the AP's weekly top-25 college football poll be removed from the BCS's formula for determining who plays in the championship game. Citing "unauthorized and unlawful" use, the AP said they never sanctioned usage of its poll, and that continued inclusion in the BCS formula could undermine the poll's integrity. Since then, the AP poll has been replaced by the Harris Interactive poll, which includes current and former media members among its 114 voters.

The BCS is a selection system that creates a series of college football postseason matchups, including a championship game between the top two teams in the country. It uses a formula that now includes the Harris Interactive poll and a coaches' poll, as well as computer rankings. Six automatic qualifying (AQ) conferences are guaranteed at least one of the 10 spots in the BCS games, leaving four at-large berths for other highly ranked teams. In general, a team becomes an at-large candidate by finishing the season ranked in the top 14. Then, the team must be selected by a bowl game's representatives. Being selected for a BCS game offers more than bragging rights; there is financial incentive as well, as money generated from media deals is split among the conferences involved in the games. Conferences with two BCS teams receive a substantially higher payout than those with one or no teams. In 2011, the BCS distributed \$174 million to college football teams; AQ conferences with one BCS team received \$21.2 million, and those with two receive an additional \$6 million payout.

Why did the AP ask out of the BCS formula? Doug Robinson of the *Deseret News* implies an answer: "Why is the media involved in this thing? It's a blatant conflict of interest. Reporters are supposed to cover the news, not make the news. By participating in polls, they're helping to determine which teams go to bowl games and which teams get millions of dollars."

ESPN also saw potential a conflict of interest with the BCS; in 2005, they removed their sponsorship from the Coaches' Poll, citing lack of transparency. Vince Doria, ESPN's vice president and director of news, explained: "We couldn't reconcile having our name on the poll and being able to cover any controversy that might arise." ESPN did not pull their sponsorship from the college basketball version of the coaches' poll.

There are some notable differences between the AP poll and the Harris poll. Harris Interactive makes their ballots public, and the market research firm claims that its poll is

statistically valid representation of all 11 Division 1-A conferences and independent institutions. As for whose opinions should matter, some sports journalists have noted that theirs is the profession is most likely to watch a full slate of college football on any given Saturday, especially when compared to coaches, who must prepare for and play in their own games.

Further Information:

Associated Press (2004). "AP sends cease-and-desist letter to BCS" [Press Release]. Retrieved September 20, 2011. Available at: http://www.ap.org/pages/about/pressreleases/pr_122104b.html

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Harris Interactive (2010). "Harris Interactive College Football Poll: 2010 Season FAQs." Available at: <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/vault/Hi-BCS-HICFP-FAQs-2010-10-15.pdf>

Robinson, D. (2004, December 27). "AP snubs BCS mess -- others should, too." *Deseret News*. Available at: <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/600100542/AP-snubs-BCS-mess—others-should-too.html>

Smith, M. (2011). "TV fee boosts BCS payout 22 percent." Retrieved September 20, 2011, Available at: <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2011/01/20110124/Colleges/BCS-payout.aspx>

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the potential conflicts of interest involved in this case study? How likely are they to occur, and what might their impact be? Do you find these concerns compelling?
2. What role should journalists play in determining BCS rankings? Is there an ethical way to take part in this process?
3. Does the Harris poll soften the ethical concerns that plagued the AP poll?
4. Would you want the Harris poll to be changed in any further ways? Why or why not?