

# Light the Lamp: Illuminating the Information Behaviour of Sports Fans

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## Abstract

Sports fans are constantly collecting information about their favourite teams, players, sports, and leagues. There are many ways out there to find this information, but learning what these methods are and how sports fans use them have not been deeply studied in LIS literature. Using three semi-structured interviews with sports fans of various degrees of fanaticism brought to light many ways that the average and not-so average sports fan finds, collects, and uses sports information. Print and digital media are extremely prominent, however untraditional methods such as subscription-based sports websites, social media websites, and social news discussion websites are used to collect sports information of various types. The population of this study included three family members and friends who all identify as sports fans. Sense-making and berrypicking are good information gathering processes to use, but can also be combined to augment sports information collection. Doing research about general sports fans that have varying degrees of interest will give us more information about the information behaviour of all types of sports fans.

## INTRODUCTION

Being a big sports fan and a former Division 1 athlete, sports have always been a major part of my life. I am always collecting information about sports in my everyday life, but being a more intense sports fan than most people are made me curious about others' information behaviour regarding sports. Sports are such a big part of our culture that I think we should learn more about the relationship between sports and information. Newspapers have entire sections dedicated to sports, there are dozens of channels that discuss teams and players nonstop, and everywhere you go, you will see people wearing clothing with a team's logo on it or discussing last night's game with friends and family. For this project, my research question is: What methods and resources do sports fans use to find information about sports?

My population is three sports fans that are either a family member or a friend. There is a difference of age, gender, and degree of fascination with sports. Because of how technology has changed over the years, I also want to see how the collection of sport information is affected by these changes. I do not feel that age or gender matters in regards to my population, and instead might give me more data than if my population included more similar people. Since I only interviewed three subjects, I was not able to interview an even number of males and females, but I feel that this limit did not negatively affect my research. I did not have any cutting points that drastically affected my population.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the world of LIS, there has actually been a lot of research about sports, but not about sport and information behaviour. There are a couple of articles that discuss this topic, however they seem to be quite specific, such as Joseph's 2016 article about the information behaviour of Australian motor sports enthusiasts. There are also many studies on Twitter and its role in the sports world. It would seem that because liberal arts hobbies are such a large part of our lives, there would be more studies on sports fans and their information behaviour. Lee and Trace discuss hobbyist collectors in their article "The Role of Information in a Community of Hobbyist Collectors", saying that "leisure activities should not be ignored given that they comprise such an important, even cherished, part of the human experience" (2009, p. 621). In Hartel's 2013 article "An interdisciplinary platform for information behavior research in the liberal arts hobby", she discusses the importance of doing research about hobbies, because "liberal arts hobbyists are prolific producers of information, an aspect of information behavior that has been neglected in information behavior research to date" (2013, p. 946). My research expands on sports information behaviour in both casual and passionate fans, something that is not prevalent in current research. While Joseph's article is a great look into a very passionate group of sports fans, I think that studying people of all levels of fanaticism in more sports is necessary to give more variety. My research dives into people who are fans of multiple sports at many different levels, which applies more to the average person. Focusing on this population also allows research into more

methods of information behaviour. In a small population with a narrow focus, there are limited resources that the fans use to gather information. If more general sports fans are studied, there will be more methods to investigate, which could lead to more research specifically into why fans use those methods. Looking more into the average sports fan's information behaviour would actually give us more insight due to the larger population and the greater number of resources.

## RESEARCH METHODS

For my research, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with three individuals. In class, we learned how to ask initial questions, follow up with other questions based on their answers, and to execute the drawing exercise of the IHI map (Lecture 6 and 8). Using Sonnenwald and Harmon's methods, I was able to start with a few broad questions and then could ask more specific questions and follow up on answers as the interview went on (2001). After each interview, I went over the recording of the interview and adapted my interview guide. I experienced no ethical issues throughout the interviews.

My first informant is Jamie Lynn. She is a 24-year-old female and works as a building substitute and teacher aide at a private school in Columbus, Ohio. I have known Jamie Lynn for 12 years. She actively follows professional basketball, professional hockey, and professional baseball.

My second informant is Urban. He is a 62-year-old male and has been a lawyer for 30 years. I have known Urban for 24 years. He actively follows professional and college sports, professional hockey, professional baseball, professional basketball, and golf.

My third informant is Jeff. He is a 25-year-old male and is a legislative aide and scheduler for a congressman in Washington, D.C. I have known Jeff for 13 years. He follows professional hockey, professional baseball, professional football, professional soccer, professional basketball, and college football. Jeff expressed liking most sports and wishing to follow all that interest him, however he does not have the time to do so.

## FINDINGS

I will be using the inductive thematic analysis method to analyze my findings. I am choosing this method because when I was interviewing my informants, they were many common themes between the topics they discussed. With this method, I am able to analyze the similarities and the differences between each informant and their information collection habits.

## Personal Relationships

All three of my informants discuss sports with friends, family, and significant others on a regular basis. Urban grew up surrounded by sports because of his father and brother. He has fond memories watching games with his family as a kid. He has season tickets to the Columbus Blue Jackets and the Ohio State Buckeyes football team, which he attends with family and friends. Jamie Lynn's boyfriend is a big basketball fan and she began watching basketball with him as a way to bond with him; soon became a basketball fan herself. Jeff and his girlfriend discuss hockey almost every day. Despite talking about their communication with others during their interviews, Urban is the only one to put friends and family on his map (see Figure 1). Jeff and Jamie Lynn do not put other people on their maps. It seems that they do not think of communication with others as a method of sports information gathering.

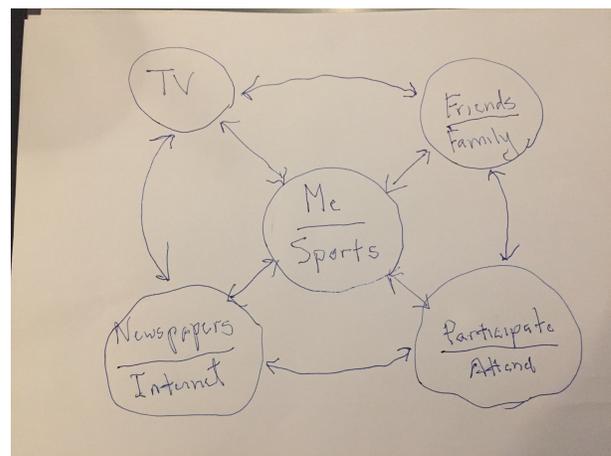


Figure 1. Urban's IHI map

## Digital and Print Media

All three of my informants use news articles to stay informed about their favourite teams and sports. Both Jamie Lynn and Jeff use almost exclusively digital resources (see Figures 2 and 3), while Urban tends to read mostly print media. Jamie Lynn and Jeff are younger than Urban, which explains this difference. Jamie Lynn and Jeff are also on stricter budgets than Urban, so they tend to look more for free content online rather than paying for a newspaper subscription. Jeff pays for The Athletic, which is a subscription-based sports website, because it is "so much cheaper than buying a newspaper every day and it's always on my phone so I can read it when it's convenient for me". Urban will use digital media, but only when it pops up on his Facebook page and he is interested by the headline.

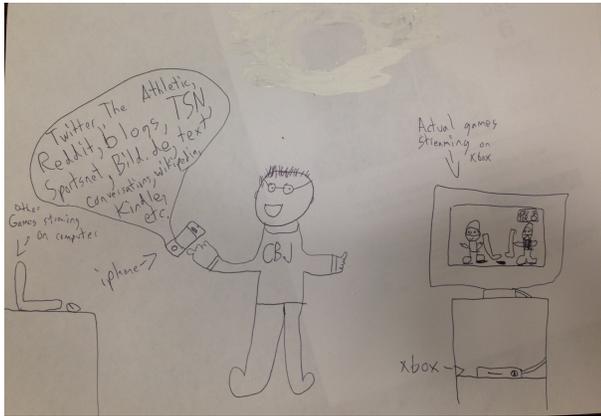


Figure 2: Jeff's IHI Map

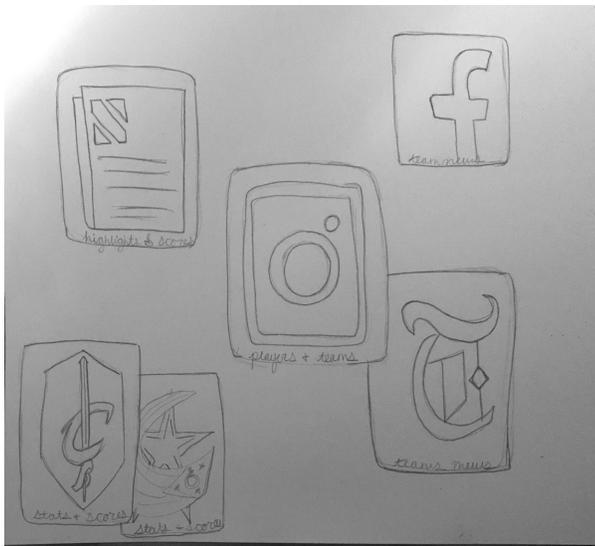


Figure 3: Jamie Lynn's IHI Map

### Frequency of Information Collection

All of my informants look for sports information on a daily basis. Jamie Lynn uses Instagram and Facebook to learn about her favourite teams and players and “I’m on those apps several times a day, so even if I’m not actively looking for it, it’s there” (see Figure 3). Jeff notes that he constantly uses his smartphone to stay informed. He receives Twitter notifications on his phone about sports. These notifications occur whenever one of the writers he follows tweets, so they can pop up at any time. He also uses Reddit to connect with other sports fans online and to learn more about trending topics, which Jamie Lynn and Urban do not use. Urban will read the paper every morning unless he does not have time. If he is unable to in the morning, he will make time to read it in the evening. Even though their information behaviours are all different, they have all found ways to interact with sports every day.

## DISCUSSION

When my informants discussed their information gathering processes, I noticed most of the time was that they did not see their information gathering as finding an answer to a question. However, by looking deeper, you can see that their hobby is full of questions they wish to answer. Each person mentions using smartphone applications to find the scores of games, which they may not realize a question they are trying to answer. I feel that Dervin’s sense-making model works very well for acquiring basic sports information due to the question-and-answer format that often appears in sports (Dervin, 1986). Many of the methods that the informants discussed are designed to give you information about a team or game quickly. More intense fans can use Bates’ berrypicking model to learn more (1989). This leads to methods that Jeff uses that were not used by Jamie Lynn or Urban, such as using a subscription-based sports website and Reddit to collect even more information, which then leads to more queries. From my data, I found that more casual fans tend to use the sense-making model and more passionate fans will use berrypicking. While fans may trend towards one method or the other, they also can transition between them. If Jamie Lynn is wondering what team the Cavaliers are playing that night and she uses sense-making to find the answer, it might spark another query that she decides to research, such as how have the Cavaliers have done against that team in the past. In this case, she would end up berrypicking. Her initial question is answered, but she wishes to expand on it. With berrypicking, you begin with a question, but in this scenario, Jamie Lynn’s question is already answered; however, she still wants to learn more, so she proceeds to do more research (Bates, 1989).

A way all three informants gather information about sports is by watching sporting events live, either on television or in person. I feel that this falls under Hektor’s “monitoring” in his Information Activities (2003). Urban’s attendance at dozens of different sporting events allows him to notice the difference between different sports and might give him a different perspective than if he watched the games on television. On the other hand, Jeff watching games on his Xbox allow him to hear the colour commentary and other aspects that cannot be captured at a live event. Jamie Lynn is not able to watch games as often, so she spends more time looking at highlights and postgame analysis, which might be something completely different since it is not in the moment of watching the event. These differences in monitoring affect the information collected by each informant and impact their information behaviour.

In the interviews, I found that communication with others was not really used to collect sport information except in one case. All of my informants cited me as a source of

information. My friends and family know me for my love and knowledge of hockey, so they regularly come to me for hockey information. My endless discussions about hockey can be annoying to some people, however I have discovered that even if my babbling is frustrating to people, they still learn from it, even if they are not actively listening. I have encountered many people who will surprise me with a bit of hockey knowledge, which they picked up just by spending time with me, even if it is not in a sports-related situation. A lot of the times, it will just be simple questions about a player or how a team is doing so far this season, but it also leads to exchanges. They will ask questions, make connections, and many times, they gain a little more interest in hockey. I see this method as “Information Exchange”, as talked about by Hektor. Hektor defines “Information Exchange” as “intended to represent the acts of ‘giving’ and ‘getting’ messages in communicative behaviour” (2003). While this did not appear prominently in the IHI maps, it was discussed at length during the interviews.

These topics have not appeared to have been discussed in prior research and would be a great place to start in order to dive deeper into the information behaviour of sports fans.

## METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

I feel that the IHI method is a good way to draw out information from the interviewees. Because it was people I knew well, it was more of a conversation than an interview. I came into each interview with a certain amount of questions, but was able to ask for clarification or encourage them to expand on their ideas. I think that it could be improved with a follow-up interview for each informant. Asking them more specific questions and having them reflect on their information behaviour would be insightful. I also think journaling would be a really interesting way to get a daily account of how the informants collect their information and to see if there are any patterns. I think they might learn something new about themselves, which could lead to them improving or changing their methods.

## CONCLUSION

Sports fans use several information gathering processes to procure their sports information, including Dervin’s sense-making and Bates’ berrypicking models. These methods intertwine with sports fans due to the question-and-answer nature of the hobby, which has not been realized by the fans themselves. Different methods of information gathering allow for numerous ways to find sports information, including digital and print media, friends and family, and watching sporting events, both live and on television. My research question was a great start to begin investigating the information behaviour of sports fans.

Bringing in sports fans of varying degrees of dedication would be beneficial to this research because of the access to different sports and different methods of information gathering and collecting. Sports and liberal arts hobbies are vital in our lives because they “generate individual rewards and enlighten society by disseminating knowledge outside of formal education channels” (Hartel, 2013, p. 958).

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## AUTHOR’S BIO

Sydney Stype ([sydney.stype@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:sydney.stype@mail.utoronto.ca)) is a Concurrent Registration Option student and is working towards obtaining a Master of Information and Master of Museum Studies. She received her Bachelor of Science in Sport Industry from The Ohio State University and was a member of the Ohio State Field Hockey team from 2011-2015. She was the print editor of the book *Hockey Abstract* by Rob Vollman, which was published in 2017 and was Amazon’s #1 hockey book for eight weeks.

## **APPENDIX 1**

**Research Question: What methods and resources do sports fans use to find information about sports?**

1. Becoming a sports fan
  - a. How long have you been following sports?
2. Being a sports fan
  - a. How often do you look for sport information?
  - b. What sports do you follow?
  - c. What teams do you follow?
  - d. How long have you followed sports?
  - e. Do you follow any seasonal sporting events?
3. Sports in life
  - a. How do sports impact your everyday life?
  - b. Do you discuss sports with other people? In what contexts?
  - c. How do you watch sports? Do you do it with other people?
4. Sports information resources
  - a. What sources do you use to collect information about sport?
  - b. Have your information collection methods changed over time?

## **APPENDIX 2**

Quote from Jamie Lynn about athletes and the Olympics when asked about seasonal sporting events such as the Olympics and the World Cup: “They are these young women and men. They’re thrust into this type of spotlight that’s extremely different than being a normal celebrity, because we’re rooting for them, not just watching them make a movie. And then you see them do the exact same thing: go on Dancing with the Stars, write a book about their success, and then sell their equipment online.”

Quote from Urban when asked about how long he has been following sports: “My brother followed baseball very, very closely, listening to it on the radio. We were young and he was a statistics freak. He would actually recalculate each players’ batting average immediately after they were at bat, and sometimes would have it recalculated before the radio announcer.”

APPENDIX 3

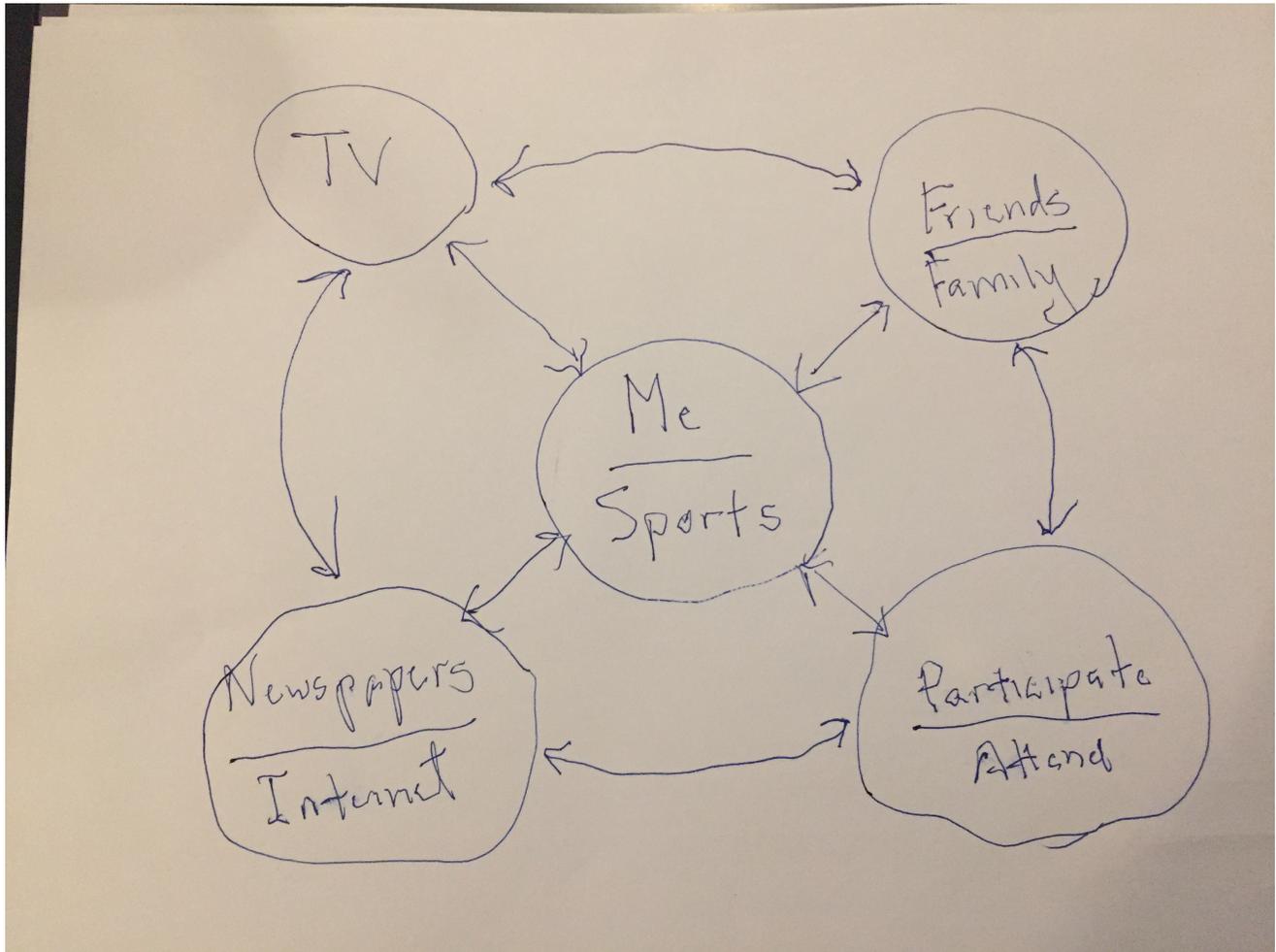


Figure 1: Urban's IHI Map

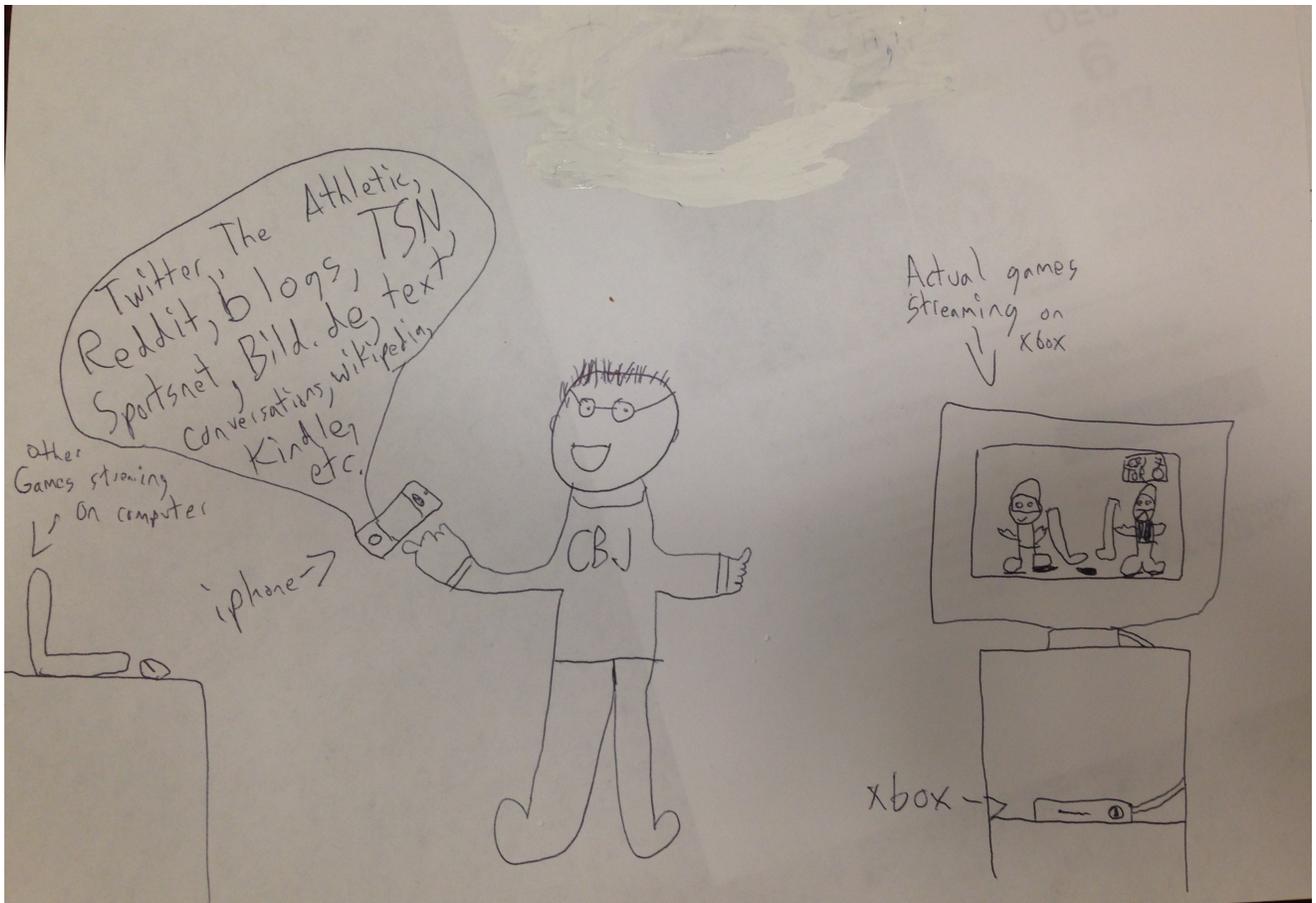


Figure 2: Jeff's IHI Map

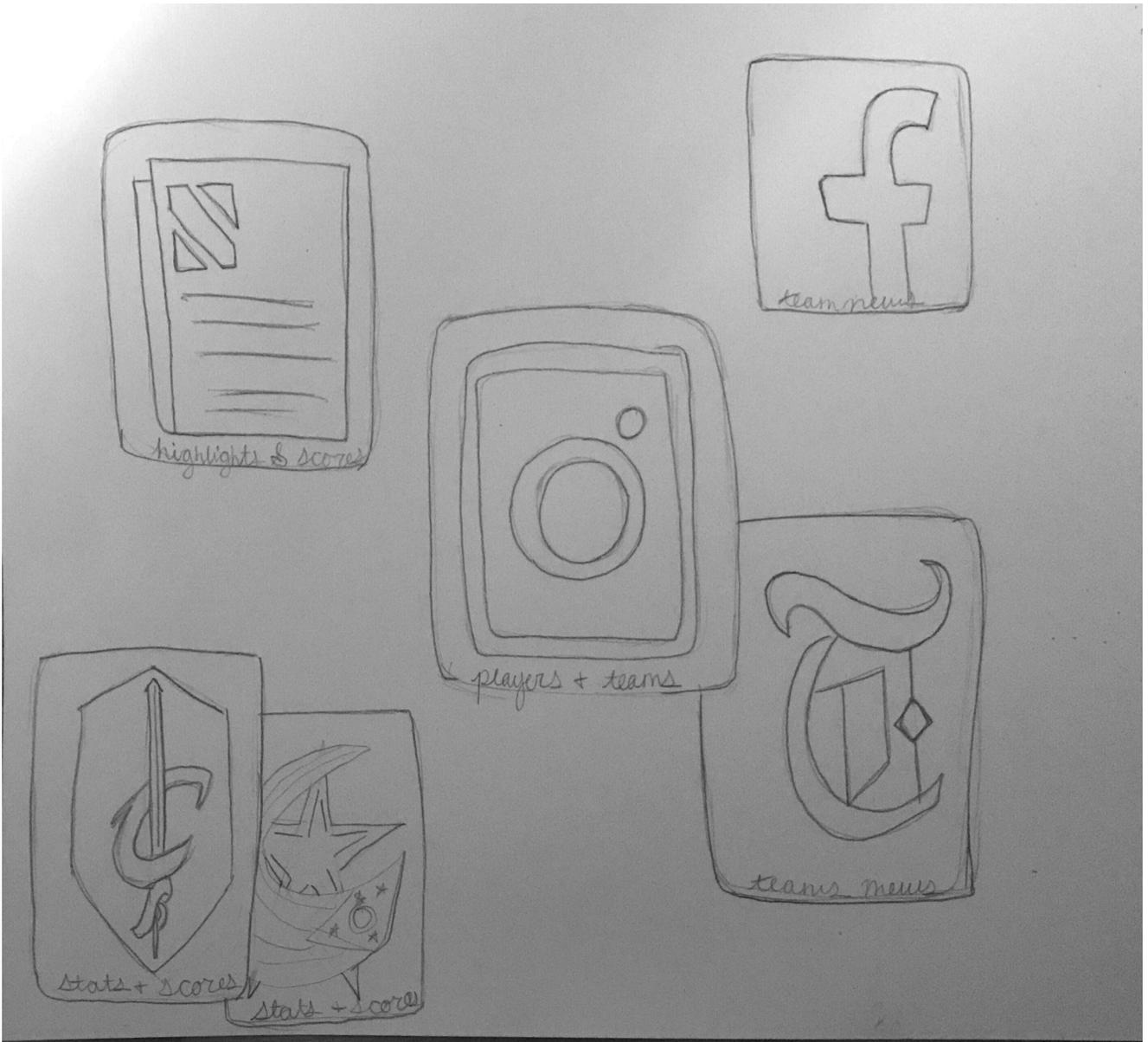


Figure 3: Jamie Lynn's IHI Map