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The Political Economy of Small-town America: Babe Ruth and the Great Pacific Barnstorming Tour of 1924

To understand the celebrity of a person like Babe Ruth you must first understand his place in the hub of a media machine that functioned throughout the 1920's and beyond. His rise to national prominence was neither casual nor based on capricious fate as a mover of human fortune. It was a methodical venture of capital and influence, an attempt to create and market a new kind of sports hero and it required a well-oiled coordination of the three major aspects of the science of political economy: politics, the economy, and the media. This paper examines how these three aspects of American life worked in conjunction with one another during Babe Ruth's heralded Great Pacific Barnstorming Tour of 1924.

The tour, organized by the Christy Walsh Syndicate, was actually sponsored by regional newspapers, local businesses, and community groups all with specific interests in bringing Babe Ruth as a celebrity to their local communities. What was created was an intertextual web of meaning with Babe Ruth at the center. Local governments, corporate sponsors, advertisers, and the media itself benefited from the singular presence of Babe Ruth as a star personality. But benefiting from all this was the Christy Walsh Syndicate and Babe Ruth himself as a cultural icon, as publicist Walsh always saw to it that Ruth's popularity and exploits were always wired back to the east coast for his syndicate papers there. The system thrived because all three aspects of community life, the political system, the economy, and the media itself all worked in a harmonium of capitalism and self-interest. Such a coordination

became the standard relationship between some many of the future communications systems and the communities to which they serve.