

Framing Athlete Activism: The Case of the National Football League Athletes' Anthem Protests

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Aim

During a National Football League (NFL) pre-season game in August 2016, San Francisco 49er quarterback Colin Kaepernick went unnoticed as he sat on the side-line in silent protest. In the months that followed, Kaepernick's protest gained popularity among his peers, with several players kneeling for the national anthem to draw attention to the issue of the disproportionate shooting of African-American males by police. These protests became a major news story in the United States (US) and sparked heated debates about athletes' right to free speech, patriotism, and racial injustice. The current study employs the theoretical framework of media framing to explore how these protests were constructed, structured, and developed in mainstream news and sport-specific media, and in turn, how the news media's framing of the issue (may) influence public perception. Specifically, this study seeks to: (i) identify the generic and issue-specific frames which dominate media discourse surrounding this issue; (ii) highlight the differences between framing in traditional media (print and broadcast) and social media and (iii) test how the framing of issues in traditional media influences social media users' perception of the anthem protests.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Framing theory has its foundations in sociology and psychology and is based on the assertion that organizing themes in the news media or '*frames*' are used by audiences to interpret what they see in everyday life (Van Gorp, 2010). These constructed frames or 'interpretive packages' are considered a crucial component of the news process as they allow journalists to organize and present information to the general public. Thus, frames play an important role in the meaning-making process for audiences, and can in turn influence public opinion. Frames can be employed by journalists as well as other elites such as politicians, interest groups, and business persons. Framing is therefore a complex process involving not only journalists, but their sources. Scholars in sport management and sport communication have used the theory and its corresponding analyses to explore a variety of contentious issues such as stadium funding and construction, mega-event hosting, and gender and ethnicity (e.g., Buist & Mason, 2010; Billings & Eastman, 2003; Zaharopoulos, 2007). Framing theory provides a useful framework to identify and examine the dynamics of sport-media coverage and its construction of meaning through the promotion of particular viewpoints, causes, and solutions to problems (Entman, 1993).

Research Design, Methods, and Analysis.

Two main datasets will be used for our frame analysis. The first will comprise traditional print and broadcast media including, but not limited to, articles from the highest circulating newspapers in the United States, transcripts from two American national broadcast networks, and posts from sport-specific media such as Sports Illustrated (si.com) and ESPN (espn.com). These data will be retrieved from the LexisNexis, ProQuest, and Newsbank Access World News databases, while sport-specific media will be sourced from their web portals. The second data set will consist of Instagram posts (and replies) related to the protests from the above-mentioned news media's official accounts. Data will be collected through web scraping using *Python*.

In the first phase of analysis, each news item/story will be coded for several basic characteristics such as source, date and time, and staff reporter/author/presenter. Two phases of deductive coding will follow in order to: (i) determine the presence of the five generic frames postulated by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and (ii) identify the reasoning and framing devices which will serve as the coding scheme for content analysis of each of the texts. The second phase of analysis focuses on the news media's official Instagram posts and adopts a similar approach as the first phase. A sentiment analysis will then be performed on the Instagram response data. This will allow us to directly observe how the public responded to the frames and test the robustness of our frame analysis.

Results and Discussion

As this study is currently in progress, we are unable to provide results, however, the study will be completed prior to the conference date. We will present the results of the framing analysis in the form of a frame matrix which is an accessible interpretive tool to (i) sort the idea elements; ii) identify the problem definition of the frame; (iii) identify and distinguish among different frames; and (iv) discover how various idea elements are deployed. We will also present sentiment scores derived from the Instagram responses based on the Harvard IV-4 Psychosocial dictionary.

Conclusion and Contribution

This study is expected to contribute to the literature on the intersection of sport, media, and politics. Specifically, this study will highlight how, and under what conditions traditional media may advance particular perceptions of athlete activism. Seeing which frames are advocated by whom and which ultimately dominate leads to a deeper understanding of power, politics, and interests in sport.

References

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