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Analyzing ESPN and the Agenda-Setting Theory

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ANALYZING ESPN AND THE AGENDA-SETTING THEORY

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies

School of Professional Studies

Gonzaga University

Under the Supervision of Dr. Heather Crandall

Under the Mentorship of Dr. Kristina Morehouse

In Partial Fulfillment

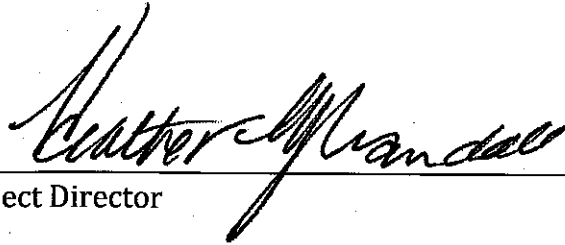
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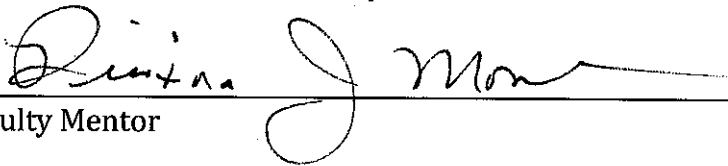
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December 2011

We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.



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ABSTRACT

This thesis initially discussed the agenda-setting theory and framing and then examined how the two concepts related to the presentation of the lead stories on a trio of ESPN outlets in comparison to a pair of non-ESPN sports media outlets. This study was achieved by conducting a content analysis of the lead stories appearing on ESPN's *SportsCenter* and *The Highlight Express* television shows, ESPN.com, SportsIllustrated.com and CBSSports.com daily for four weeks. While the ESPN outlets made similar decisions to that of the non-ESPN outlets on the priority of story placement, there were enough instances to show that ESPN did frame its stories in a way to draw more viewers. This was done by focusing more attention on teams from larger media markets and by keeping sports, such as NASCAR, in which ESPN has a financial stake in the success of the sport on the minds of consumers.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

One of the networks born in the infancy of cable television was the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network. More commonly referenced by its initials, *ESPN*, the network first took to the airwaves on September 7, 1979, as the first 24-hour channel devoted solely to sports. Originally conceived with the intent to showcase only New England sports teams competing around the region of the network's headquarters in Bristol, CT, the station instead took a national and international view of the sports world. Thanks to ESPN, a sports fan could obtain scores, news, highlights, and watch full games featuring teams based all around the country and the world. This was different than what was available for sports fans at the time of the network's founding. Viewers were limited to viewing a short sports report as part of the local newscasts, which were primarily directed to the fans of the local teams. This meant Green Bay Packers fans living in Southern California rarely heard news or saw highlights of their favorite team. ESPN changed that by presenting the best sports stories of the day on a national level regardless of where or when they occurred, as well as a complete summary of the day in sports. Additionally, fans previously had a limited selection of games to watch. This was especially so for someone living in a city or region without a major sports team located in their media market. Thanks to the introduction of ESPN, games from major sports and college teams were now being aired in markets all across the country.

ESPN has done nothing but grow over the last three decades. The original flagship channel for the network is now available in over 100 million homes in the United States alone. Meanwhile, the company's holdings have blossomed into a total of eight domestic cable television networks, ESPN International that reaches over 200 countries on seven continents, 750 radio affiliates in the United States and syndicated radio stations in 11 countries, a dominant web

site, a broadband channel, a bi-weekly magazine, a book publishing entity, a producer of original content such as movies and documentaries, a chain of ESPN-themed restaurants, and an event management entity (“ESPN Fact Sheet,” 2010). Included among the content airing on the network are the National Football League’s (NFL) Monday Night Football telecast, men’s and women’s national college basketball games, all four Grand Slam events in tennis, soccer’s World Cup and the Little League World series.

ESPN is the lone channel currently available that is geared solely toward the national sports fan. A number of cable networks do cater to a large regional base, such as Fox Sports West, the New England Sports Network, and the Sunshine Channel in Florida, but none match the availability of ESPN on cable systems from coast to coast and beyond. Add to this the many offshoots of the original television network and ESPN has developed into one of the leading, most powerful sports conglomerates in the world. The presence and popularity of the network has even resulted in parents naming their children “ESPN” (“Texas Toddler,” 2004).

The Agenda-Setting Theory

The massive reach and influence of ESPN does not come without several potential problems. As a leading voice in sports that can overwhelm competitors by sheer production volume, the network’s opinions and decisions carry a great deal of weight within not only the minds of fans, but also people in the sports industry itself. Decisions such as which stories to devote more time to, which teams and leagues to feature more prominently, and the order of priority given to highlights from games are all debatable in terms of favoritism by viewers. Does the network place more emphasis in terms of the content it presents on the varying entities it has financial contracts with, or does it provide a corresponding amount of content to those teams or leagues the network does not have a vested financial interest in? If a game televised on a

competing network has an exciting finish, will ESPN show highlights of it equal to the time devoted to showing highlights of games aired on its own network? Examples such as these leaves ESPN in the same position as any other media outlet in regards to the agenda-setting theory.

Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw examined the agenda-setting theory in 1972. The associate professors of journalism at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, conducted a study on how impactful the news media was with potential local voters during the 1968 United States Presidential election. The hypothesis for their study stated “the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issue” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177). The study compared the content for stories that appeared in the local media to what these potential voters viewed to be the major issues in the campaign. Although the authors stressed at the time of publishing that further analysis was needed to corroborate their findings, they felt the results of this initial study indicated that since voters “tend to share the media’s composite definition of what is important strongly suggests an agenda-setting function of the mass media” (p. 184). So in the minds of McCombs and Shaw, the media influences or sets the agenda for the public based upon what news and information it decides to disseminate.

A key aspect of the agenda-setting theory is how the media *frames* the content. Defined by Entman (2007) as a “process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation” (p. 164), framing involves the media’s ability to decide upon the importance of varying aspects of stories and informing the public of those points, sometimes at the expense of other facets to the story. These decisions are played out by which stories are aired as the top of television newscasts,

placed on page one as opposed to page 12 of a newspaper, and which are discussed by the outlet for several days versus a story that is in the news for just one day.

Statement of the Problem

In some ways, ESPN may be more prone to calls of setting the agenda for sports than other news media entities are due to the lack of competition for the network. In news, one can obtain divergent opinions on a subject from watching different news channels or reading unique newspapers. Each outlet may reach the internal decision that a different aspect of the same story is more important to discuss than another. Additionally, each outlet may possess information that others have not yet acquired. This allows the public the opportunity to gain a more comprehensive knowledge of the story by accessing the varying outlets. The consumer has the ability to increase his or her knowledge of the story through sampling the differing information available in each outlet. However, in sports there is no outlet that can match the reaching tentacles of ESPN, which means there is just one dominant voice available on a national level.

This is a potential problem because ESPN can push its opinions, ideas, and interests on the public and the world of sports more effectively than any other media outlet is able to. If, for example, ESPN continually places a particular team or sport in the spotlight more than another, it could leave itself open to calls of favoritism. This is especially so if the network has a financial stake in promoting these leagues, teams or individuals over another. ESPN also has run a series of popular television commercials for the network that feature well-known athletes and coaches. If a player is used in an advertisement to help promote the network, how will ESPN impartially cover that athlete during the season? Will that person be viewed differently than an athlete who is not part of an ESPN advertising campaign?

Importance of the Problem

In 2011, ESPN signed a 20-year, \$300 million contract with the University of Texas, Austin's department of athletics to create the Longhorn Network. This 24-hour network will showcase the many Texas sports programs, as well as academic interests at the school such as lectures and graduation ceremonies ("Texas, ESPN," 2011). This long-term, high-priced agreement places ESPN in a difficult situation. It needs to actively promote the Texas program to allow the contract to pay off financially for the network. Yet, ESPN still needs to remain impartial when covering the teams at the school. Even if a Texas game is deemed worthy by some outsiders to be the best one played on the day and should be selected as the first highlight aired on the network, ESPN could still be open to calls of following its own agenda by showcasing the Texas highlights before they do any other game. How will the network handle a situation such as if there is a cheating or recruiting scandal at Texas similar to what has happened at other major schools such as Ohio State this past summer? If the network does not adequately cover a similar story at Texas with the same investigative reporting zeal as it has done at other schools, ESPN could be accused of minimizing the negative issues on Texas due to the contract it has with the school. ESPN could then be viewed as following its own agenda for promoting the network over its journalistic integrities.

These scenarios need to be brought back into the context of the massive reach of the network when compared to not only other sports outlets, but also other media outlets. Figures released by the Nielsen Company on November 13, 2011, stated that ESPN was the most watched cable television network for prime-time programming for the previous week (Gorman, 2011). The influence of the network is unlike any of its sports competitors, which means its opinions and any slants — intentional and / or unintentional — carry a great deal more weight with consumers than those originating from another outlet.

The journalistic code of ethics calling for impartiality may be followed within the news gathering department of the network, but there are many other departments within ESPN that do not require that same standard. Just as a national network, such as the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), may air on its late-night talk shows interviews with actors and actresses who have shows that air on the network, ESPN also airs programming featuring athletes or teams they have financial contracts with. This means the radio branch of the network can pick and choose whom they want to air interviews with and the web site can write stories on any subject they deem newsworthy. With no need for impartiality, there is nothing stopping a Texas athlete or coach, for example, to be featured across the many ESPN platforms on a regular basis, with each appearance serving as a reminder about the Longhorn Network. A constant media presence such as this for Texas can be viewed by some as free publicity for the Longhorn Network and, by extension, both ESPN and Texas.

Definitions of Terms Used

The *agenda-setting theory*, introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972), details the impact the news media has on society through the stories it presents to the public.

Closely associated with the agenda-setting theory is *framing*, which looks beyond what is being presented by the media and instead at how and why it is being presented (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

Cable television is defined as television networks a consumer must pay a subscription fee in order to obtain. This is in contrast to over-the-air television networks that do not require a subscription to receive.

A *media gatekeeper* serves as the link between the media and the consumers of the news (Shoemaker, 1996). The gatekeeper determines what stories and what facets of stories are

presented to the public. There are several gatekeepers involved with every story, from the person who assigned the story to a reporter, the reporter itself, the editor of the story and an overall manager / editor / producer who determines what stories make the final version of the newspaper or newscast.

A *media outlet* is defined as an organization that provides information to the public about current events through mediums such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

This thesis examined the impact of how ESPN's influence potentially mirrors the principles of the agenda-setting theory. Chapter two consisted of a literature review of the agenda-setting theory and framing, as well as the impact of ESPN on both the world of sports and society as a whole. Chapter three detailed the scope and methodology involved with the study, which included a content analysis of the lead stories presented on a given day by both ESPN and non-ESPN outlets. Chapter four chronicled the results of the study itself, while chapter five offered a discussion of the results and thoughts on limitations of the study and additional research possibilities to further examine the ideas discussed in this study.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

What is stated in the mass media can have a far-reaching impact on society. How often, or how little a story is discussed, as well as how the many intricate aspects comprising a topic are covered, all have an impact on what the public thinks about an issue. A media outlet can help to set an agenda for the public even if the consumers do not receive their information directly from the media. Aiding in this ability to set an agenda is the credibility of the media outlet as determined by the public. This credibility goes along with the consumers knowing or perceiving any biases the reporter or media outlet may have toward the issue itself. A media outlet that has a vested financial stake in an issue may cover it differently than an outlet that does not. These and many other considerations for how, when, and how often stories are presented and placed within newscasts or newspapers are explained by the agenda-setting theory.

The Literature

The Agenda-Setting Theory

McCombs and Shaw (1972) introduced the agenda-setting theory through a study that detailed how the news media was able to impact the opinions of citizens on the 1968 United States Presidential campaign. Their study found that the priorities of stories presented by the media became the priority for those who consumed the news. The more importance the media gave to a story, topic, or issue, the more importance the general public gave it as well. Though first examined in politics, their findings on the potential affect of the media on the public holds true regardless of the subject matter.

Sonski (2006) discusses the agenda-setting theory as being a combination of the media indicating the importance of stories or topics and their presentation of that priority resulting in an impact on public opinion. The potential impacts of the agenda-setting theory in regards to the

media are far reaching. Even if a person does not consume information directly from the media, they still can be prone to learning about the priorities determined by the media through conversations with those who did in fact read, hear, or view the media. Yang and Stone (2003) continued this viewpoint when they stated that a consumer could thereby impart the agenda they have received from the media to a person who is not a regular consumer of the media. There is a potential limitation to this if two people consume different or competing formats of media. A consumer who solely receives news through watching a television station may have a different agenda set for them than another who primarily receives their information through reading a newspaper. This also is true for people who receive their news from differing outlets of the same medium (television station versus television station, newspaper versus newspaper).

The priority the media assigns to a story or certain aspects of it may be carried over to the consumers of the story through the agenda-setting theory. Seltzer and Mitrook (2009) feel that the higher priority the mass media gives a story, the more prominent it will remain in the minds and conversations of those consumers who receive it. This also was discussed by Fortunato (2008), who felt the media's agenda becomes the public's agenda through the weight given to stories in the media. The more important the media makers view a story to be, the more attention it will receive in the media. This increased presence only serves to reinforce its importance to the consumers of the news. As a story is presented more often or in greater detail to the public, the more its importance will be ingrained in the minds of the consumer (Behr & Iyengar, 2001). As an example, a story presented by the media for five consecutive days will be considered as being more important by consumers who view it than a story presented on just one day.

A study conducted by Vu and Gehrau (2010) looked at how conversations about news stories can have an impact on the importance of issues. To test their concept they placed a

fictitious story in a community magazine in a German village and then analyzed how the story resonated amongst the citizens of the town. Nearly half of the people, 47%, who read the article felt the issue — the potential use of a vacant building for kindergarten classes — was the most important issue in town, and 69% of the people who read the article discussed it with other residents of the village (p. 106). Despite the topic not being broached in the magazine in the two years prior to its placement, the article was immediately able to set an agenda that the town then discussed.

The agenda-setting theory deals with how the media influences consumers by prioritizing stories. A secondary step to this theory follows and involves the media moving from telling the public *what* to think about to *how* to think (Sheafer, 2007). Though related, these are two different considerations in how to present stories. Informing the public of what to think about can leave the overall impression of the story up to the consumer. Conversely, that impression is already conveyed to the consumer when the story tells them how to think.

This transfer to the next stage of the theory involves the concept of framing.

Framing

Whereas the agenda-setting theory is used to analyze the importance of stories, framing looks more in-depth at how the story is covered. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) discuss how framing involves the psychological and sociological impact of a story on consumers. Framing looks at how a story is constructed by a member of the media and then presented to the public. What parts of a story are available to the media and what parts are determined to not be worthy of inclusion in the version presented to the public all have an impact on the eventual attitudes of the public after consuming the story. This picking and choosing of facts and information shapes the way a story is presented to the public. One outlet may decide one facet is the most important

part of the story, while another may feel that same piece to the puzzle is not even worth mentioning. Even the word choices within the same story presented by different outlets can leave a lasting impression on the consumer. These differing presentations provide the consumer with two unique viewpoints of the same story (Entman, 2007). The importance of an example such as this was discussed by Scheufele (2000), who analyzed that framing brings the meaning or interpretation of the story and not just the story itself to the forefront of the public.

Besova and Cooley (2009) looked at the framing aspect of the agenda-setting theory through an analysis of articles appearing in *The New York Times* and *The Times* in the United Kingdom on foreign countries. A positive portrayal of countries in the articles led to a corresponding positive opinion of the country by the readers of the publications. Additionally, countries that were portrayed in a negative light in the stories resulted in the readers having a negative opinion of the country.

Wu and Coleman (2009) used a similar basis for their study. They looked at how the 2004 United States Presidential candidates were portrayed in the media in two cities during the weeks leading up to the election. The results showed that while positive portrayal in the media did lead to positive feelings of the candidates in the consumers, stories that were negative in nature toward a candidate led to an even higher percentage of negative feelings — when compared to the increase in positive feelings — by the consumers. Their findings revealed that consumers responded more to negative viewpoints framed by the press than positive ones did. A corresponding study by Coleman and Wu (2010) on the same election supported this concept. They found there was a “significant correlation” (p. 321) between the visual media portrayals and negative emotions by the consumers toward the two candidates, while there was “no significant correlation” (p. 321) between the visual media portrayals and positive emotions felt

by the public due to the images they viewed. Combined, these studies demonstrate the impact framing by the media has on consumers.

This framing of either a positive or negative light on an issue by the media also was discussed by Seltzer and Dittmore (2009) in their analysis on the ability for the NFL to have its new flagship network, the NFL Network, carried by cable television systems across the country. Many cable systems initially resisted adding the channel to their subscription packages due to cost concerns for both the cable systems and the subscribers, which left fans of the sport unable to view several high-profile games that were airing exclusively on the network. While both the NFL and cable operators were assigning blame for the impasse to the other, the general, mainstream media more often than not carried the NFL's viewpoint into the stories it wrote on the issue. This was due to the NFL's ability to more successfully cast the cable operators in a negative light with the media. However, and not unexpectedly, the cable operators received more support from the media that covered its own industry than the NFL did, with some of this support consisting of portraying the NFL in a negative manner. Ultimately the public sided with whichever media they received their news from.

The decisions on the intertwining of agenda setting and framing fall on the shoulders of the gatekeeper for a story (Singer, 2006). This person, or groups of people, makes conscious decisions as to the priority of stories and the supporting information to relay to the public. They are the ones who decide what should be left in a story, what should be removed, and how it is presented to the public. Each of these gatekeepers has different personal and organizational agendas to follow as their guidelines for story presentation (Hess, n.d.). The decisions of the gatekeeper go a long way in determining the credibility of an organization and the individual presenting it for consumers.

Credibility

A media entity must have a certain level of credibility in the eyes of the public for it to have an impact on consumers through its presentation of the news. Without credibility, the public will not be influenced by what the media outlet is reporting. However, a difficulty with this concept is that credibility is often in the eye of the beholder. Those who agree with the agenda the outlet is setting will view the stories to be more accurate and worthy of their prominent placement than an outlet that disagrees with their point of view. Conversely, there are some outlets a person will never view to be credible because the consumer disagrees with the agenda set by the entity (Gaziano, 1987).

In a column, Myrick (2002) reminded readers of another potential problem with credibility in terms of the media; the companies that bring the news to the public are in fact businesses and are geared toward making money for the shareholders and investors. Therein lies the potential for a media outlet to sacrifice some of its credibility or objectiveness to have a better opportunity at making a profit. This also could lead to each outlet following a slightly different agenda. Pethokoukis (as cited in Choi, 2002) continued this concept when he wrote that pressure for success in ratings for television news often results in style winning over substance. This means a story that a network feels will generate more viewers may receive more attention to it by the outlet than a story that may be considered more valuable or important to the public.

Impact of ESPN

As the lone national 24-hour all-sports cable television network in the United States, ESPN is uniquely positioned in the world of sports. Unlike the multiple all-news channels that are available, ESPN does not have a national competitor. As such, they have become one of, if not the true leader in sports presentation in the country. With the network also operating a

leading web site and hundreds of nationally syndicated radio stations, its influence continues to grow within the sports world. Nathan (2000) goes so far as to state how ESPN and its massive reach through its many platforms has developed into having an impact beyond sports and into the culture of the country itself. Its ability to reach over 100 million homes in the United States alone provides it a very influential voice on whatever topic or issue it wishes to cover. What is aired and said on ESPN resonates with consumers from all walks of life. In Nathan's opinion, ESPN is an "empire" (p. 528).

The NFL recognized the ability for ESPN to influence sports and society when the network aired a television series entitled *Playmakers* during the fall of 2003. The premise for the series was a professional football league. Much of the content for the dramatic series depicted the off-the-field activities of players, activities that included drugs and sex, with many of the depicted scenes also having racial undertones. ESPN stressed that *Playmakers* was about a purely fictional league, but the NFL felt the show was a direct portrayal of itself as opposed to a fictional viewpoint. Though acclaimed by critics and viewers, the NFL was unhappy with the portrayal of the fictional league by the network that had just attained broadcasting rights to the league's signature program, *Monday Night Football*. ESPN would cancel *Playmakers* after just one season of airing (Strudler & Schnurer, 2006).

Clavio and Pedersen (2007) looked at how closely aligned the content appearing within *ESPN the Magazine* was with the financial contracts the network had with various sports leagues. Their study looked at articles and photographs — both number of and sizes — appearing in the publication on the National Basketball Association (NBA), the Arena Football League and Triple Crown (Horse) Racing. They examined the content of the magazine over significant time periods while the network had and while the network did not have a financial

interest invested with the three entities. Perhaps surprisingly, the findings demonstrated that there was no noticeable difference in the amount, placement, or size of the content for any of the three leagues either when the network did or did not have a financial stake in the success of the respective leagues.

Kian, Mondello, and Vincent (2009) conducted a study in which their results differed with the one conducted by Clavio and Pedersen. This study compared the number of articles published on either ESPN.com or CBSSports.com during the 2006 National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) women's basketball tournament. The study found that 93% of all stories on the event were published on ESPN.com (pp. 484-485). Coincidentally, the various ESPN networks aired every game that was played during the course of the NCAA Tournament, so this financial commitment by ESPN to the tournament could be viewed as in fact influencing the amount of coverage ESPN.com provided on the event.

Fortunato (2008) explains that this financial contract between a sports entity and a network does in fact create a partnership between the two where each has an interest in finding ways to increase viewers, sponsors, and profits. This was continued in the analysis conducted by Billings and Eastman (2003) of the content aired by NBC during the prime-time television hours of the 2002 Winter Olympics that were held in Salt Lake City, UT. The study first identified the individual athletes who were discussed by NBC commentators and then counted the number of times they were mentioned. The results showed that the majority of the top-20 mentioned athletes during the telecasts were American (60%) and only two other countries had more than one athlete included on the list. Additionally, the analysis demonstrated that the American athletes were framed by NBC to be more "composed and courageous" (p. 584) than athletes from other countries were. The network had paid a considerable amount of money to air the games,

and it wanted to do all it could to generate a sizeable audience to make its investment beneficial. In the mind of the network, creating a more positive impression of the American athletes could help to do just that.

Media, Athletic Representation, and Society

The agenda-setting theory also has the ability to have an impact on society as a whole. It can inspire consumers to differing thoughts and actions, with its importance and impact detailed through several pieces of literature.

Bissel and Zhou (2004) found that the way a female athlete is portrayed by the media could potentially have an impact on viewers, particularly young women and how they feel about their own body images. The findings of their study indicate that “sports media exposure might be linked to more positive attitudes about the body” (p. 18) for female viewers. This is in contrast to much of the content produced by the entertainment industry that showcases and celebrates overly thin women in movies and television. Another study, this one led by Sonski (1996), discussed how the success of the University of Connecticut women’s basketball team increased the media exposure of the team and women’s basketball in general in the state. The media’s positive portrayal of the program, the sport, and female athletes in general were attributed to aiding in the dramatic increase in the number of young girls in the state who wanted to play basketball. In a five-year span from 1990 to 1995, the start of the Connecticut program’s success, the number of girls participating in Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) basketball in the state increased from 401 to 984 (Results section, para. 9).

The impact of what a television network determines to be the most important highlights from a game also can play a role on society. Kingsbury and Tauer (2009) looked at this point of view in terms of what highlights from NBA games ESPN decided to air during the league’s 2006

playoffs. The study looked at the highlights of 40 random games that were contested during the playoffs and determined that even though only 9% of the baskets made in the games were dunks, 23% of all highlights aired by the network were dunks (p. 26). This focus on the individual as opposed to team success can impact the importance viewers, especially young viewers, give to aspects of the sport. The concepts of other skills such teamwork, defense, and passing that are vital to the dunk being able to occur can be construed as not being as important to those who view the highlights due to their diminished focus as part of the footage. This also can lead young viewers to placing an overemphasis on individual play and setting themselves apart from the rest of the team (p. 23).

Philosophical Assumptions

Honesty. Truthfulness. Integrity. Credibility. Impartiality.

These words all help to define not only how the public views the media, but also how we as individuals view people around us. If a media outlet or a member of the press fails to display these characteristics, the amount of trust the consumers will have in them will be very limited. The same can be said for people we know and meet each day. The more people demonstrate that they are honest, truthful, have integrity, are credible, and can impartiality look at an issue, the more others will want to be around them.

It is easy for a sports media relation representative for a school or team to fall into the trap of looking at an issue solely from the inside and just self-promote the teams and athletes they work for. That is the wrong path to take. Yes, there is a responsibility to accentuate the positives for the team they are being paid to work with and promote, but it would be naïve to think the result of a game is only the due to how the team one represents plays and has nothing to do with the efforts of the opposing team. To only mention positives and avoid all negatives of

one team without crediting the opposition limits the ability for sports media relation professionals to be seen as accurate and trustworthy. Positives do need to be presented and highlighted, but if as an example, a basketball game is lost primarily due to an unusually high number of turnovers committed by the team one works for, that negative needs to be mentioned. The more accurate the reporting is, the more trust will be gained for the professional by the media and members of the public who read their work.

This also holds true on a personal level with members of families and friends on anything that takes place outside of work. A person needs to be able to step back from issues and remove any emotion that may cloud an opinion on a subject. Individuals may have strong viewpoints on many issues, but they cannot let those emotions override being able to accurately and fairly view a subject. The more a person can be seen as honest and truthful, demonstrate integrity and credibility, and have an impartial outlook on life, the more friends they will have and the better friend they will be to others. To suggest that these traits come easily for a person or that at some point they will not be difficult to accept and display would be wrong. There will be situations where accepting the truth and being honest will be far more difficult than being untruthful or dishonest would. However, having the willingness to display these traits in challenging times speaks volumes about the credibility a person has both in their professional and personal lives.

Rationale

The agenda-setting theory has demonstrated its impact on both the mass media and the general public for close to four decades. What the media chooses to focus on, as well as not focus on, helps to provide a guideline to consumers on the importance of topics, subjects, or issues facing them. Additionally, how these stories are presented, or framed, by the media has an impact on the viewpoint the public has on a story or topic after consuming the information. What

the media decides to focus on also has an impact on society. Its decisions as to what is important can help inspire the public in both thought and action. A limitation with the agenda-setting theory is that it only works if a media outlet is viewed as being credible. Without credibility, the public will not follow the priority being presented by the media.

As the lone national all-sports network in the United States, ESPN is in a unique position amongst the media. With no true competitor for it, any agenda set by the network is the only one the public receives on many topics. This absence of differing viewpoints provides ESPN with the potential to impart its opinion without debate. Another factor aiding the potential presence of the agenda-setting theory at ESPN is that the network has many financial investments with sports leagues and teams. This means ESPN does not just report the news it also makes it. These financial contracts mean the network needs the programming it airs and, correspondingly, the leagues and teams it is airing games of, to be successful. This need for success can potentially help to change the decision making process as to what the media, in this case ESPN, views as the being the most important information presented to the consumers.

Research Questions

The agenda-setting theory states that the way the media covers stories will help to set an agenda for the public. With its unmatched influence and popularity in the world of sports, ESPN has the potential to impart an agenda on consumers from not only across the country, but also around the world. An analysis of any presence of the agenda-setting theory or framing by the network was the basis for this thesis.

The research questions to be answered were:

R1 – How do the selections of the lead (most important) stories of the day by ESPN on its daily *SportsCenter* (ESPN) and *Highlight Express* (ESPN News) television shows and on its web

site (ESPN.com) compare to the lead stories that appeared on other sports web sites (SportsIllustrated.com, CBSSports.com)?

R2 – Do the selections of these lead stories by ESPN frame an agenda in such a way that the network is stating a particular game, team, or sport is more important than others are?

R3 – Does ESPN give a higher priority to events that are televised on one of its networks than events aired on other networks?

Chapter 3 – Scope and Methodology

The Scope of the Study

To analyze the decision-making process of ESPN and examine if there is any agenda setting or framing involved in its determination of what are the most important stories, events, or highlights to air on a given day, a comparison was made between the lead stories appearing within three ESPN-based productions and two additional national all-sports web sites.

SportsCenter is the flagship news program that airs on ESPN. New versions of the program are produced multiple times a day. Each show runs 60-90 minutes and includes game highlights, analysis, interviews with newsmakers, and feature stories. *SportsCenter* was selected for this study because it is the most comprehensive national sports news television program available in the United State.

The Highlight Express is a 30-minute program that airs late in the day and in the overnight hours on ESPN News and offers a more condensed version of the content airing on *SportsCenter*. It focuses more on providing highlights from games as opposed to the analysis or interviews that can be found on *SportsCenter*. *The Highlight Express* was chosen for this study not only because of it being a slimmed-down version of *SportsCenter*, but also because the selections for the show's lead stories can offer a comparison to what *SportsCenter* airs. Though both programs are produced for the ESPN family of networks, there can be a difference between the shows as to which stories are featured most prominently. Additionally, it also is a program aired both daily and nationwide.

ESPN.com is the home on the internet for the various ESPN networks and has been rated as the most popular sports web site in terms of traffic ("Top 15," 2011). It contains sports news, video highlights, feature stories, statistics, scores, standings, analysis, blogs, video streams of

games, information on upcoming telecasts on all of the ESPN channels, and a number of other informational pieces geared toward the sports fan. Just as there is the potential for *SportsCenter* and *The Highlight Express* to offer different lead story selections, so too can the lead stories appearing on ESPN.com differ from one of the network's television programs in a determination of what is the most important news of the day.

SportsIllustrated.com is the home on the internet for the popular weekly sports magazine. It currently ranks as the fifth most popular sports web site in the country ("Top 15," 2011). This site was selected for the study partly due to its popularity, but also because unlike ESPN.com it is not affiliated with any television network and thereby has a limited possibility of following a daily story order to correspond with any other affiliated outlet or program. Just like ESPN.com, SportsIllustrated.com offers visitors to the site many of the same informational pieces such as game stories, scores, schedules, and standings.

Ranking as the third most popular sports web site is CBSSports.com ("Top 15," 2011). It too contains many of the basic information sports fans are interested in that appear within the two previously mentioned web sites. This site also was selected because it is affiliated with the Columbia Broadcast System (CBS) television network, which has a sports division and is in competition with ESPN for viewership, especially on weekends. Both networks air NFL games, college basketball games, golf and tennis events, and other sporting events. In a similar fashion as to the reasons for the analysis of ESPN as the premise for this thesis, CBSSports.com also has the potential to make decisions as to determining the most important stories for its site based upon what the associated television network is airing, or is about to air, on a given day.

The Methodology of the Study

Research Design

A content analysis, or an examination of a selected amount of material (Neumann, 2006), was conducted that examined what appeared as the top, or lead, stories on each web site or featured within each program daily at 8 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time for a four-week period from September 19, 2011 to October 16, 2011. This time of day was chosen because the web sites would still be primarily focused on summarizing the events of the prior day. Also, the 8 a.m. EDT *SportsCenter* episode is the last rerun from the originally aired 2 a.m. EDT show before new episodes start to be produced at 9 a.m. EDT. Thus, this is the best episode to look at in terms of providing a complete summary of the events from the day before. The 8 a.m. EDT edition of *The Highlight Express* also is a rerun of the most recent new episode of the show that aired the night before.

ESPN.com offers five main featured stories, or topics, on its site. These five stories are designated in a horizontal row of five small pictures and, appearing directly above that, one large picture. After a set time, the large picture rotates from one of the stories covered in the static smaller pictures to another.

SportsIllustrated.com and CBSSports.com also feature their respective main stories in a similar manner that ESPN.com does. One difference between the three sites is that ESPN.com continually has five main stories appearing on its home page, while the other two sites can change the number of lead stories featured on its respective home page from as few as two stories to as many as five.

Only the lead stories appearing on all three web sites were taken into account for this analysis. As for *SportsCenter* and *The Highlight Express*, the lead stories were designated as the ones that aired during the opening minutes of the respective programs.

The lead stories were selected for this analysis because these are considered to be the top news stories or highlights of the day by the respective outlet. Regardless of network affiliation or subject interest (news channel, weather, sports, financial network), the lead stories are featured in a more prominent position on web sites and within television programming. Comparing and contrasting what each of the five outlets considered to be the most important stories would help to demonstrate any framing ESPN may have toward a particular subject, topic, or event. Additionally, only the lead stories were taken into account for this analysis because these selections are the most comparable between the five outlets. Not having the ability to compare a complete 30-minute *Highlight Express* or a 60-minute *SportsCenter* to any other nationally televised program makes it difficult to compare the full content of the programming with what appears on other outlets. What *SportsCenter* may air in the 45th minute of an episode cannot be compared to anything produced by SportsIllustrated.com, CBSSports.com or any production from another national outlet.

Quantitative and Qualitative Research

This analysis was conducted by way of utilizing both quantitative and qualitative design methods. A quantitative design provides a statistical analysis of the data, while a qualitative design requires a more interpretive analysis of the results (Rubin, R. B., Rubin, A. M., Haridakis, and Piele, 2010). The former allows for an objective examination of what the numbers produced in the results of the study say, while the latter provides for a subjective interpretation as to why the results are what they are.

The lead stories from each of the five outlets were analyzed to determine how often they appeared in the other outlets at the same time. The more the same story appeared across each outlet, the more it was objectively considered to have been one of the most important stories of

the day. If it appeared on multiple outlets, there is little individual outlet framing taking place. But if it appeared on only a single outlet, it can be inferred that the gatekeeper for that outlet was placing or framing the story's importance at a higher level than the other outlets were. A qualitative analysis was then used on those stories that did not appear across the outlets in an attempt to determine the reasoning a particular story may have received more attention from one outlet than the others. Instances such as this are where questions of framing may be examined.

Reliability and Validity

The more those viewing the results of a study consider it to be reliable and valid, the more serious it will be taken.

Reliability factors in how consistent the steps followed to generate a study can be replicated by another attempt at gathering the same results (Neumann, 2006). Though the results may vary from one study to another, the more the steps of a study can be duplicated the more reliable it is considered to be.

As for this study being conducted, someone else would be able to track the lead stories across the five media outlets rather easily. Due to the need to only chart the lead stories, another researcher could gather the quantitative and qualitative data gathered from a second attempt at this study without too much trouble. Adding to the ease of the parameters of this study is the fact that it can be conducted by a single person and without needing to consult outside personal opinions, such as a survey, for the results. It also is a fairly objective study with limited subjectivity needed when examining the data.

The validity of a study looks at how truthful it is (Neumann, 2006). The more the results of similar studies on a topic match one another, the more valid a study is considered to be. An additional part of validity is how authentic, or honest, the results of a study are (Neumann, 2006).

This study was conducted over one month's time. The time span makes this study more valid than a study conducted over just one week but less valid than a study encompassing two or more months. Another variable to be considered for its validity is the time of year this study was examined. The results of a study compiled during a month in either winter or spring may be different than the results for this study due to the type and number of sporting events that are taking place at a particular time. As for the authenticity of this study, the firmer the data and conclusions generated through it can be explained the more authentic it will be considered.

Chapter 4 – The Study

Introduction

Research for this study was conducted by charting the lead stories that appeared on ESPN.com, SportsIllustrated.com, CBSSports.com, *SportsCenter* (airing on ESPN), and *The Highlight Express* (televised by ESPN News) daily at 8 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time starting on September 19, 2011 and going through and including October 16, 2011. The stories at this time of day were selected because each of the outlets would still be primarily focused on providing a summary of the events of the day before. In most instances, there was no major breaking news story occurring at that time of the day that would alter what was appearing on the various outlets at the conclusion of the day before.

The stories that appeared on the three ESPN outlets were grouped together in one pool, while the stories that appeared on SportsIllustrated.com and CBSSports.com were grouped together in a second pool. This was done to provide a more accurate measure of the combined ESPN efforts and the production decisions of two competing outlets.

Stories between the two pools were then divided into two categories. The first category was a comparison of *matching topics* between the two pools. A story was considered to be a matching topic if the individual or sport featured in the story appeared in both pools. This meant if a highlight from an NFL game appeared in both the ESPN pool and the non-ESPN pool, it was considered to be a matching topic. If a story on an NFL game appeared in one pool and a story on a Major League Baseball (MLB) game appeared in the other pool, it was not considered to be a matching topic.

The second story category was a comparison of the *exact story* appearing between the two pools. A topic was defined as being an exact story if it appeared within both pools. If the

highlight of a Green Bay Packers game appeared in both pools, it was determined to be an exact story. If a story on a Green Bay Packers game and a Baltimore Ravens game appeared in the two pools, even though they were both highlights of NFL games, they were not considered to be exact stories.

The number and percentage of matching story and exact topic categories were tabulated for each individual pool.

The two categories were then broken down further. The first way was to add together the total number of stories appearing for each category in its pool. As an example, a highlight or story on a single college football game that appeared on each of the three ESPN outlets was counted three times for the ESPN pool. Conversely, if a story on baseball's Milwaukee Brewers appeared only on SportsIllustrated.com and not on CBSSports.com, it was counted only once for the non-ESPN pool. The second way was to add together all of the unique stories appearing for each category in its pool. In this instance, the same story appearing three times within the ESPN pool was only counted once.

The more closely the numbers between the two pools matched, the less ESPN could be seen as setting an agenda for the sports world. This would be due to the fact that the stories they were covering mirrored what the non-ESPN outlets also were covering. ESPN would not be seen as framing the importance of one story over another due to each outlet giving the story's importance relatively the same weight. If all outlets are covering the same stories, then those truly can be considered the lead stories of the day. Conversely, the less the stories between the two pools matched one another, there was a higher potential for ESPN to be seen as setting an agenda. This is because they potentially could be seen as using influences other than true news

value to determine the lead stories. In this instance, ESPN would have the potential to be seen as framing the importance of one story over another.

Results

Research Question #1

How do the selections of the lead (most important) stories of the day by ESPN on its daily SportsCenter (ESPN) and Highlight Express (ESPN News) television shows and on its web site (ESPN.com) compare to the lead stories that appeared on other sports web sites (SportsIllustrated.com, CBSSports.com)?

In terms of matching topics, nearly three quarters (72.8%) of the lead stories that appeared on the three ESPN outlets were the same as what appeared on the two non-ESPN outlets. This high percentage decreased the possibility for ESPN to set an agenda because the decisions made by ESPN as to what were the most important topics of the day mirrored the decisions made by the non-ESPN outlets.

Though the percentage of exact stories in the comparison of the ESPN pool to the non-ESPN pool (64.3%) was slightly lower than that of the matching topics (an 8.5% difference), it still was a high number. Some of the reasoning behind this number being a little lower than what was calculated for the matching topics result is that the subject matter may be the same, but what is covered within that topic varies more. As an example, with over 60 college football games taking place on a single Saturday, what is considered to have been the most exciting game can be open to interpretation by different gatekeepers. The same holds true for the even lower percentages of unique stories between the two pools as ESPN had a greater capability to present more lead stories through its outlets and the design capabilities of its web site when compared to the other two outlets.

The high percentage of both the matching topics and exact stories indicated that ESPN did not, at least among the lead stories being covered, set an agenda that was dramatically different than what the non-ESPN outlets did.

Research Question #2

Do the selections of these lead stories by ESPN frame an agenda in such a way that the network is stating a particular game, team, or sport is more important than others are?

The results of RQ1 indicated that the lead stories that appeared in the ESPN pool were very similar to the lead stories that appeared within the other outlets. Due to this high level of matching it was, at first glance, difficult to say that ESPN was setting an agenda vastly different than the non-ESPN outlets were. Both the stories and the sports selected as the lead stories between the two pools demonstrated that each of the outlets in the two pools came to similar conclusions as to what was considered to be the most important stories of the day. However, looking inside the numbers more closely showed two instances where ESPN could be seen as setting an agenda.

The first instance concerns the order of presented stories from Major League Baseball. The time period for this study included the last few weeks of the regular season and the opening rounds of the playoffs for the sport. There were a total of 16 days during the study in which games in both the American League (AL) and the National League (NL) were played, which meant highlights would be available for both leagues on the same day. On all but one of those 16 days, both *SportsCenter* and the *Highlight Express* featured highlights from an AL game before it did highlights from an NL game. (Neither of the three web sites chronicled in this study were utilized for RQ2 due to all three having the technological capability to combine links from multiple stories into one feature story, thereby limiting the opportunity to discern which story it

was prioritizing ahead of another.) This result indicated that ESPN was in fact framing to the public that the AL highlights were more important than the NL highlights were.

ESPN's physical location may have played a role in determining that the AL stories were more important than the NL stories were. ESPN is based in Connecticut and the two teams most often featured amongst the lead baseball stories during the time of this study were the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox, both of which compete in the AL. Meanwhile, the NL teams featured more often than others during this time frame were the Atlanta Braves, Milwaukee Brewers, and St. Louis Cardinals. With ESPN's home being so close in proximity to both Boston and New York City, the network's decision makers may have viewed the more local — to ESPN — story of the Red Sox and Yankees as being more important than the stories of teams located several hundred miles away.

The Boston Red Sox were a major focus of stories nationwide as they let a sizeable lead in the race for the playoffs — nine games in early September — slip away from them. However, the Braves failed to make the playoffs after holding an eight and one-half game advantage in roughly the same time period, so one cannot say the “collapse” for one team was far more significant or noteworthy than the other. Baseball's regular season came to an end the night of September 28 with both the Red Sox and the Braves losing their last respective game to miss the playoffs. The September 29th (as viewed for purposes of this study on the morning of September 30) edition of *SportsCenter* began with the opening five stories being about the Red Sox, while the *Highlight Express* continued this theme by having its first three stories being about the Red Sox. There were no stories in the opening minutes of either program on the Braves, and the remainder of the episodes on the respective channels did not go into the same depth of analysis on the Braves as was initially presented on the Red Sox. Based upon these results, the network

was framing that the collapse of the Red Sox was a bigger and more important story than the collapse of the Braves was, even though both lost nearly identical leads.

The second instance where ESPN could be seen as framing the importance of a story for the public involved auto racing's National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) circuit. A total of 11 stories on NASCAR appeared on the three ESPN outlets — eight on ESPN.com, two on *SportsCenter*, and one on *The Highlight Express* — during the four weeks of this study. Conversely, not one story on NASCAR appeared on either of the two non-ESPN outlets during the same time frame.

Some of this can be attributed to ESPN.com having the ability to feature more stories on its site than either SportsIllustrated.com or CBSSports.com can, which allows for the web site to present a greater variety of sports to cover as lead topics for visitors. But reasons as to why there was an 11-0 difference in the number of stories between what appeared in the two contrasting pools also can be ascertained in answering RQ3.

Research Question #3

Does ESPN give a higher priority to events that are televised on one of its networks than events aired on other networks?

ESPN is one of five networks to share in the broadcasting duties of NASCAR races. The American Broadcasting Company (ABC), which owns ESPN and has put in place a coordinated production synergy between the two networks, along with Fox Sports, Turner Network Television, and the Speed Channel also air NASCAR races over the course of the sport's season that begins in early spring and ends in late fall. Either ESPN or ABC aired each of the five races that were held during the time period of this study. Due to the significantly higher number of stories on NASCAR that appeared in the ESPN pool than in the non-ESPN pool during this time

span, which coincides with the network broadcasting five NASCAR races and attempting to build awareness for the telecasts and increase ratings, the results allow us to answer “Yes” to RQ3.

ESPN also has television contracts of some kind with the other major sports that were predominantly featured in lead stories during this study, including the NFL, MLB and college football. Since there was a high level of consistency in terms of matching topics and exact stories between the ESPN pool and the non-ESPN pool of outlets, NASCAR is the best and lone example that allows us to ascertain that ESPN does frame an agenda toward events it covers.

Statistical Results – Matching Topics

In looking at the statistics generated through the matching topics — a general story topic that appeared in both pools — calculations (Table 1), 72.8% of the total lead stories that appeared within the ESPN pool for the four weeks of the study also appeared within the lead stories of the non-ESPN pool during this same time. Additionally, 82.3% of the stories appearing in the lead stories for the non-ESPN pool for the month of the study also appeared within the lead stories for the ESPN pool. In looking at the actual figures produced from the study, there were a total of 376 stories that appeared across the ESPN platforms in this time. Of that, 274 of them also appeared within the non-ESPN pool of stories. From the other angle of the study, there were 164 stories of matching topic stories that appeared within the non-ESPN pool, with 135 of them also appearing in the ESPN pool.

In terms of unique stories — general story topics within each pool — 70.8% of the lead stories in the non-ESPN pool were identical and only 46.9% of the lead stories detailed in the ESPN pool were identical. In looking past the percentages toward the raw numbers, there were a total of 145 unique story topics that appeared within the ESPN pool during the time of the study,

with 68 of them appearing across multiple ESPN outlets. The non-ESPN pool saw 106 unique stories over the period of the study, with 75 of them discussed on both outlets that comprised the pool.

Table 1

Matching Topics

Story Type	Pool Comparison	Number of Matching Stories	Number of Total Stories	Percentage of Matching Stories
Total Stories	ESPN Pool to Non-ESPN Pool	274	376	72.8%
Total Stories	Non-ESPN Pool to ESPN Pool	135	164	82.3%
Unique Stories	ESPN Pool to ESPN Pool	68	145	46.9%
Unique Stories	Non-ESPN Pool to Non-ESPN Pool	75	106	70.8%

Table 1 Matching Topics Table

Statistical Results – Exact Stories

As for the exact stories— a specific story — that appeared within the two pools, 64.3% of the stories that appeared in the ESPN pool also appeared in the non-ESPN pool, while 77.4% of the stories in the non-ESPN pool matched what appeared in the ESPN pool. Of the 370 specific stories — differentiating between two stories on the same sport — that appeared within the ESPN pool, 238 of them also appeared in the non-ESPN pool. Alternately, 130 of the 168 stories that appeared in the non-ESPN pool also could be found in the ESPN pool.

In looking at each individual pool for the number of unique exact stories, only 49.8% of the stories within the ESPN pool matched, while 67.2% of the stories in the non-ESPN pool matched. There were a total of 207 unique stories appearing within the ESPN pool, with 103 of them appearing multiple times within the pool. In looking at the non-ESPN pool of outlets, of the 125 unique exact stories appearing within the pool, 84 of them appeared in both outlets.

Table 2

Exact Stories

Story Type	Pool Comparison	Number of Matching Stories	Number of Total Stories	Percentage of Matching Stories
Total Stories	ESPN Pool to Non-ESPN Pool	238	370	64.3%
Total Stories	Non-ESPN Pool to ESPN Pool	130	168	77.4%
Unique Stories	ESPN Pool to ESPN Pool	103	207	49.8%
Unique Stories	Non-ESPN Pool to Non-ESPN Pool	84	125	67.2%

Table 2 Exact Stories Table

Discussion

The comparison for both the matching topic and exact story calculations demonstrated that what was aired in the ESPN pool was very similar to what was found in the non-ESPN pool. There was only an 8.5% difference in the percentage of matching topics of lead stories between the two pools and a 13.1% difference in the percentage of exact stories. Combining these

numbers and then averaging them out shows that only a little more than one out of 10 stories were different between the two pools.

The difference in the comparison between unique stories appearing just within each pool demonstrates that the two non-ESPN outlets closely mirrored each other in terms of selecting stories to cover. Just over 70% of the unique matching stories that appeared on SportsIllustrated.com and CBSSports.com were identical.

However, there is a significant difference in the single pool comparison of just the ESPN outlets. Less than half of both the matching stories (46.9%) and the exact stories (49.8%) that appeared on ESPN.com, *SportsCenter*, and *The Highlight Express* were identical. This is in contrast to the calculation of the unique stories for both matching topics and exact stories in the non-ESPN pool (roughly 70%). This means just under half of the stories that appeared within the ESPN pool appeared on multiple outlets within it, while the majority of the stories that appeared in the non-ESPN pool appeared on both outlets that were examined for this study. Some of this can be attributed to ESPN.com consistently presenting five stories each day, while the two non-ESPN outlets rarely featured more than three lead stories on a daily basis. As the lead stories on all three web sites generally were different topics in an attempt to cover as wide of a range of interest as possible, ESPN.com had a greater number of opportunities available to present a variety of different story topics than CBSSports.com and SportsIllustrated.com did. This allowed ESPN to reach consumers with more diverse interests than the non-ESPN outlets were able to, thereby increasing its reach into a wider percentage of the public.

This increased reach also presented an opportunity for ESPN to gather more viewers to its various television networks, more listeners to its radio stations, and more visitors to its web site. Higher ratings for each outlet allow ESPN to increase its advertising revenues and make it a

more financially viable entity. This ties in with the concept of framing, where ESPN makes decisions to cover particular sports or teams with the intent to drive more traffic to its outlets and thereby increase its various revenue streams. This could be seen with the way ESPN framed the order of its baseball coverage. The New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox not only play in two of the largest media markets in the country — with ESPN's headquarters physically placed in between the two home cities for the teams — they also are two of the most popular (and unpopular) teams in the sport. ESPN used the draw of these two teams and the sizeable fan base they automatically provide to help drive traffic to its outlets. Though it could be argued that the stories on the other teams that were playing at the same time were equally compelling, featuring the Milwaukee Brewers, St. Louis Cardinals and Texas Rangers more prominently would not provide as large of a ratings boost to the network as stories on the Red Sox and Yankees would. The NASCAR example provided at the end of the section of this thesis on RQ2 also was a strong example of framing. ESPN had a financial stake in the success of NASCAR, so the network used its bully pulpit to draw more attention to its offerings for the circuit.

Myrick's (2002) column discussed this very point when he stated how media outlets not only have a responsibility to the public, they also have a responsibility to the owners and shareholders of the company they work for. These outlets do not exist solely to provide information or a service to consumers. They also exist to make a financial profit for those who run and own the outlet. Pethokoukis (as cited in Choi, 2002) furthered this point when he wrote how the need for profits can lead to different decisions for stories than one based purely on information. The study conducted by Billings and Eastman (2003) on the way NBC framed the American athletes during the telecast of the Olympics reinforces this idea. The network was framing the Americans as being more compelling and perhaps even likeable than those from

other countries in an attempt to garner more interest in the Olympics and the telecasts, which would serve to increase ratings and assist the network financially. However, as Fortunato (2008) said, actions such as these are necessary due to the need for both the network and the event to generate a better financial bottom line. One hand has to help the other.

It also should be noted that framing works the other way, too. Neither CBSSports.com nor SportsIllustrated.com had a financial interest in the success of NASCAR, as an example, so they framed their story offerings in such a way as to ignore the sport. While ESPN could be seen as telling consumers NASCAR was important, it also could be said that the non-ESPN outlets were saying NASCAR was not important due to the lack of information — and potentially due to the lack of an internal financial arrangement with the organization — provided on the sites for the sport. The NASCAR finding in this study not only follows this idea, it also mirrors the Kian, Mondello, and Vincent (2009) study on the placement of stories for the 2006 NCAA women's basketball tournament. ESPN had a large financial reason to boost interest in the tournament, so it chose to run a significant number of stories on the event on its site. Conversely, CBS Sports received no financial gains for providing additional promotion or increasing interest of the tournament, so, just as in the NASCAR example, it limited its coverage of the games on CBSSports.com.

There are many factors that comprise the decision making process that leads to the placement of stories placement in media productions. Continuing with the sports news theme of this thesis, some of these influences include, but are not limited to, having (or not having) a reporter or camera on site at the game, the ability to air an exclusive interview with a particular person, having an expert ready to provide a unique analysis of a game, technical problems that prohibit the airing of a highlight or interview and thereby changing the story order, ratings or

financial concerns for the network, the arrival of breaking news, the time allotted for a particular story or a sportscast as a whole, the need to promote another event airing on the network, as well as simply what was the most compelling story of the day. Factors such as these all go into the decision making process for a gatekeeper. However, the consumer may not fully grasp or understand everything that goes into determining what stories air on a network and at what place on a television show or on a web site. All the consumer sees is the end product, and that is all they are able to judge an outlet on. There very well may be legitimate and perhaps unintentional reasoning by an outlet behind the determination of what stories appear within a sportscast or on a web site, but decisions do have to be made and that leads to what the consumer ultimately sees. These decisions, innocent as they potentially may appear to be, can still leave the consumer with the idea that there is an agenda being set by a media outlet, and that agenda by the media is transferred down to the consumers of the outlet, as stated by Fortunato (2008). As Seltzer and Mitrook (2009) further explained, a lasting impression is left on the public when they consume the information presented to them. The more an outlet presents a story in a way that gives it a higher priority than other stories, for whatever reasoning by the gatekeepers of the outlet, the more the consumer will view the topic as being more important than others are.

Chapter 5 – Summaries and Conclusions

Limitations of the Study

This study detailed just four weeks in an entire year. It only provided a comprehensive examination of the lead stories that appeared over this time frame, which means the results could not be extrapolated into any other or additional time period.

The time of year in which this study occurred also is a limitation. While there were a sizeable number of sports that were in season during the four weeks of the study, the results could be different at other times of the year when there are either more or fewer major sports taking place. A four-week examination during the summer months when baseball is the lone major sport that is in season could present results showing the two media pools to be more similar than they were in this study. Equally possible is the idea that the results for the months of January and February could show the two pools to have a lower percentage of similar stories presented between the pools due to there being far more major sports going on at the time. More available options to choose from naturally leads to have more possibilities in selecting what are the most important stories of the day.

Further Study

As was stated above during the limitations section of this thesis, this study only examined the lead stories for one month out of the entire year. Extending a future study to a lengthier time span and to different months of the year when a varied number of sports are taking place would provide a different analysis of the agenda-setting theory and framing opportunities for both ESPN and other outlets.

Another potential study to conduct would be to examine the same outlets but at different times of the day. As the day moves toward night, story topics progress from summarizing what

has taken place the day before to what will take place later that night. Examining which story topics the outlets choose to promote in advance of the games taking place could result in an increase in both agenda setting and framing opportunities. ESPN could focus its attention more on what will be airing on one of its networks as opposed to what airs on other channels.

Also, determining a way to expand the study beyond just the lead stories on the various outlets would provide a more thorough examination of how similar or how different the decisions made by ESPN are to other outlets. One of the difficulties with this concept that would need to be overcome would be finding an outlet that balances the content aired during an hour-long edition of *SportsCenter*. Without this, any study beyond the lead stories would be considered incomplete in terms of providing a more exact analysis of the network and the agenda-setting theory.

Adding interviews with gatekeepers to a future study could be revealing and potentially shed some additional light as to the decision making process for story placement and coverage. Perhaps the best way to include interviews as part of a future study would be to complete a similar analysis of lead stories that was the basis for this study and then allow the gatekeeper who made those decisions the opportunity to comment on the results presented to them. This may provide a more effective rationale on some of the decisions that were made as opposed to just receiving general thoughts on the gatekeeper process for story placement. Another possible way to include interviews and obtain a more subjective analysis of the results would be to ask gatekeepers from media outlets not utilized in the study to comment on the findings. These gatekeepers who have no vested interest in the decision making process of another outlet may be able to provide a more impartial analysis of the decisions that led to the results.

The month-long period for this study took place in terms of relative “calm” on the sports world. There were no major breaking news stories that impacted lives beyond the results of the games the media outlets were covering. That was the case for this time frame, but it would be interesting to see how sports media outlets covered sports in times of crisis, such as the news that broke after the completion of this study involving Penn State University and the alleged sexual assaults by one of the school’s former football coaches. Would the sports outlets deem this tragic story to be more important than the results of the games that were being played, or would it be “business as usual” for the determination of the lead stories on the various outlets? How would the coverage be altered on these widely varying topics during the lead segments of the outlets? Would different outlets present different story orders? If the alleged crimes occurred at the University of Texas, where ESPN has a financial interest in the success of the program, how would the network cover the story compared to other outlets?

Conclusions

Just as people should try to be as impartial as they can, media outlets should strive to provide objective reporting and decision making in regards to the stories they present and how they are presented. The more objective and impartial a media outlet is, the more trust and credibility it will have in the eyes of the consumers. In some ways a media outlet has a greater need for this impartiality on a daily basis than an individual does. This is due to the decisions made by the outlet having the ability to impact a far greater number of people than an average individual person is able to.

This is where applying the agenda-setting theory to the media can help to examine the affect it has on consumers. The media has a very powerful influence on the public. It can introduce topics to the public and keep subjects on the minds of even those who only indirectly

receive the information. This power can be a good thing for both the media and the public, and it can be a bad thing. How a story is presented, how often it is presented, what information is stated and what is not stated — the framing of a story — all play a role in the message received by the public from the media.

While a media outlet such as ESPN has a responsibility to aim for impartiality, the reality is that decisions are made at the network and at media outlets around the world that have interests other than providing the most objective reporting of stories possible. This is especially so when financial concerns are involved. A network would cease to exist without the presence of a continual revenue stream to the outlet. This leads networks to basing some of their decisions on which stories to cover on which provides it with the most beneficial opportunity to gain the eyes and ears — and dollars — of consumers. The decisions by ESPN to focus more of its lead baseball coverage on the Boston Red Sox and New York Yankees than on other teams in an effort to gain viewers, as well as the number of stories run by the ESPN outlets on NASCAR due to both the network and the sport having a major financial interest in generating success are just two examples of ways in which ESPN frames some of its stories on aspects other than the most important news of the day. This does not make ESPN unique to any other media outlet. To have not factored in its own bottom line into the decision making process would have made ESPN unique, more so than it already is.

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MENTOR AGREEMENT (To be submitted with Thesis Proposal)

You have been asked to serve as a Mentor for Justin Kischefsky, who is completing the requirements for her/his Masters Degree in Communication and Leadership Studies. As a mentor you are asked to share ideas with this student and read the next to final draft of their thesis. You are not expected to directly supervise this student's work but rather meet with them as a "young colleague." If you are willing to serve as a Mentor for him/her, please sign this agreement.

I am willing to serve as a Mentor for Justin Kischefsky as she/he completes her/his thesis. I realize I do not need to supervise their work in any direct fashion and will only serve as a more experienced colleague with a younger colleague. I will provide help in the way of suggestions, ideas and resources and am willing to review drafts of their written work. I also agree to read the next to last draft of the student's thesis and will sign my name on the title page of their final draft. My signature on the thesis only indicates that I have read it and is no indication of the quality of the work. I will not be asked to assign a grade or make any evaluative comments to the course convener.

Signature Kristina J. Morehouse

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Date 9-13-11