
1-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Weight, Erianne A. and Cooper, Coyte G. (2015) "Framing the Industry: Front-Page Coverage of Intercollegiate Athletics in Five Major Newspapers," *Journal of Applied Sport Management*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 4. <https://doi.org/10.18666/JASM-2015-V7-I4-5982>
Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jasm/vol7/iss4/11>

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Framing the Industry

Front-Page Coverage of Intercollegiate Athletics in Five Major Newspapers

Erienne A. Weight
Coyte G. Cooper

Abstract

This study examined the prevalence, content, and tone of front page intercollegiate athletic coverage within daily sampling of five major newspapers during the 2011 calendar year through a theoretical lens of framing as a theory of media effects. Analysis reveals broad media presentation of an industry characterized by lavish spending and widespread corruption in football and men's basketball with roughly 98% of the college sport-coverage word count devoted to men's sport with 73.7% covering football and 23.8% covering men's basketball with dominant emergent themes including financial exorbitance, scandal, athlete compensation, conference realignment, conflict between athletics & the academy, athlete entitlement, athlete discipline problems, coach power, and hyper-competitiveness.

Keywords: *intercollegiate athletics, college sport, framing, media effects, reform, publicity, public discourse, newspaper coverage*

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Many current scholarly investigations in intercollegiate athletics have been driven by research questions citing headlines of scandal and calls for reform as dominant features in the popular press (Richardson & McGlynn, 2011; Smith, 2011; Splitt, 2011; Thelin, 2011). These articles, largely driven by observation-based statements, highlight the perceived focus of the media on areas of deficiency in the current operating model of intercollegiate athletics and provide support for a significant public perception problem.

Scholars have debated the role of the mass media with some arguing the media serves a watchdog purpose informing and directing political discourse; while others believe the media is a source of sensationalism leading to a skeptical and ultimately unresponsive and cynical public (Bennett & Serrin, 2005; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011). Regardless of its role and effect, the pervasive power and influence of the media cannot be disputed. As Kane notes, “the mass media have become one of the most powerful institutional forces for shaping values and attitudes in modern culture” (1988, pp. 88–89).

Media coverage has been a source of rich research within the field of sport management with related developed inquiry covering golf controversies (Daddario & Wigley, 2006), gender coverage, and portrayal (e.g., Bryant, 1980; Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998; Cunningham, 2003; Sagas, Cunningham, Wigley, & Ashley, 2000), and intercollegiate athletic sport coverage (e.g., Cooper, 2008; Pederesen, Whisenant, & Schneider, 2003) through a variety of media. To this point, however, there has not been a study exploring front-page intercollegiate athletics coverage, content that reaches a broad audience and serves as a foundation for intercollegiate athletics understanding for those who do not choose to read the sports section, watch ESPN, or demonstrate fan-like behavior.

Scandal and reform-based popular press articles, the associated public outcry, and related scholarly calls for reform contributed to the development of the research questions pursued within this study. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence, content, and tone of front-page intercollegiate athletic coverage within five major newspapers sampled daily during an entire calendar year. This study was pursued in an effort to supplement existing literature and understanding about the dominant themes currently in circulation. This inquiry is significant because front-page coverage represents the information processed by those who may not read the sport section or follow sport. What is covered on the front page, then, may provide a foundational knowledge of the industry for these casual observers. An understanding of this content is critical for athletics administrators, particularly for the majority of athletics programs who rely on public subsidy. While this study builds on a solid body of literature exploring sport in the media, framing as a theory of media effects was utilized in an effort to provide a foundation for future research (Scheufele, 1999).

Literature Review

In past content analysis research within sport management literature, scholars have focused a great deal on the identification of trends that exist in sport-related messages that are disseminated by the media (Duncan, 1986; Rintala & Birrell, 1984; Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004). In particular, a large database of studies exist that focus on the specific gender inequalities that are present in messaging and their potential impact on readers (Blackwood, 1983; Bryant, 1980; Miller, 1975; Sage & Furst, 1994). While this study is not specific to gender coverage, many of the findings within this robust body of literature are relevant to the methods and findings within this inquiry as the messages and coverage have been tied to public perception and cultural norms. This relevant literature will be presented grouped by prevalence and content followed by a broad discussion of literature surrounding the intercollegiate athletics landscape at the time of this inquiry, setting the stage for the tone-related research questions. Combined, this literature provides a nice launching point from which the theoretical foundation and research questions for this study are supported.

Prevalence and Content of Sport Coverage in the Media

Foundational to the literature on the importance of mass media to public perception and dialogue, several pioneer content analysis studies conducted in the 1980s quantified the tremendous disparity in gender coverage in sport. These authors warned of the far-ranging consequences of this coverage as the mass media disseminates messages to a broad audience and has the potential to impact belief systems. (Bryant, 1980; Luebke, 1989; Theberge & Cronk, 1986; Wanta & Leggett, 1989). Moving into the 1990s, several studies examined sport coverage in national newspapers (Crossman, Hyslop, & Guthrie, 1994; Theberge, 1991). A study by Duncan, Messner, and Williams (1991) on four major newspapers (*USA Today*, *Boston Globe*, *Orange County Register*, and *Dallas Morning News*) demonstrated unique data trends that supported the notion that women's sports were being severely underrepresented in a variety of key areas. For example, the study found stories focusing on men's sports outnumbered stories addressing women's sports by a ratio 23 to 1. Similarly, men's teams also outnumbered women's teams by a ratio of 13 to 1 in photographic coverage.

These findings have been reinforced in several follow-up studies demonstrating tremendous disparity in sport-related gender coverage in widely distributed newspapers (Kinnick, 1998; Matheson & Flatten, 1996; Wann, Schrader, Allison, & McGeorge, 1998), institutionally affiliated publications (Huffman, Tuggle & Rosengard, 2004; Shifflet & Revelle, 1994; Wann et al., 1998), and to a lesser extent, the NCAA News (Cunningham, Sagas, Satore, Amsden & Schellhase; Shifflet & Revelle, 1994) and athletics department website content (Baroffio-Bota & Banet-Weiser, 2006; Cooper, 2008; Cooper, 2009; Cunningham & Sagas, 2002). These authors have documented the critical link between media coverage, sport

consumption, and public perception. This study can add to the research on gender coverage by examining a broader scope of intercollegiate athletics coverage. The issues central to gender coverage, perception, and consumption are relevant to a discussion of content and tone because of the powerful role the mass media front-page coverage can play, particularly on the casual or nonsport fan.

Critical to the foundation of this study is the content of sport-related coverage and the impact this content can have on societal beliefs. This type of research is also most well developed related to gender coverage in sport. As illustrated by Urquhart and Crossman (1999), women tend to receive coverage in “sex-appropriate” sports where messages reinforce traditional female societal roles, coverage reinforces gender-appropriate stereotypes (Jones, Murrell & Jackson, 1999), or the media actively constructs gender ideologies (Christopherson, Janning & McConnell, 2002).

By examining this well-developed line of scholarly literature on gender media coverage in intercollegiate athletics, it is interesting to note trends demonstrating broader inequity (or narrower coverage) by the mass media, and less inequity (and broader coverage) on institutional websites, with one study providing evidence of equitable coverage in the same “nonrevenue” sport. This builds support for a hypothesis that front-page coverage of intercollegiate athletics in the mass media will likely be narrow and inequitable in terms of prevalence. This study will add to the literature on the prevalence of intercollegiate athletics coverage by examining a unique sample of daily front page coverage in major newspaper sources.

In terms of a broad-based approach, there has been research dedicated to analyzing the themes or messages present in media coverage as it relates to sport, yet very little specific to media themes in intercollegiate athletics. Studies in this broad area of research have focused on specific meanings of messages presented primarily in media surrounding major sporting events including political messages relayed through Olympic hosts (Bianco, 2006; Chen, Colapinto, & Luo, 2012; MacAloon, 1991; Panagiotopoulou, 2009); messages about disability relayed through the Special Olympics (Carter & Williams, 2012); and messages about race through a variety of sport-related mediums (Ferrucci, Tandoc, Painter, & Leshner, 2013; Prim, DuBois, & Regoli, 2007). In the most relevant study in this line of research focusing on the College World Series (CWS) broadcast, Southall et al. demonstrated the content within the broadcast supported a commercial model emphasizing profit maximization. This study indicated a dearth in educational content present in the broadcasts, and as a result the product tended to emphasize the importance of athletic performance in NCAA athletics (2012). More literature related to the content and power of media messages will be presented in the theoretical framework section.

Theoretical Framework

While the previous research has been useful in advancing sport management literature and practice, there are clear limitations when it comes to content analysis research examining sport media messages in nonsport-specific publications that reach casual nonsport fan observers. In order to address this gap, measure the current climate of intercollegiate athletics coverage, and to provide a path for future research, this study relies on a theoretical foundation of framing as a theory of media effects.

The theory of media effects is based upon the concept that the media can construct a social reality and therefore have a strong impact “by framing images of reality...in a predictable and patterned way” (McQuail, 1994, p. 331). A media frame is simply a way of packaging an idea, issue or storyline to allow efficient relay to audiences (Gitlin, 1980). The frame, therefore, “provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p.143).

These media effects, however, are limited by the interaction between the media and the recipients (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; McLeod & Pan, 1989). Just as media discourse affects public opinion, so too does public opinion play a role in the journalistic process as writers “develop and crystalize meaning in public discourse” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 2), and promote “particular definitions and interpretations of political issues” (Shah, Watts, Domke, & Fan, 2002, p. 343). The construction of media frames and the motives of the sender are often unconscious...they are “attributes of the news itself” (Entman, 1991, p. 7); whereas, individual frames are “information-processing schemata” (Entman, 1991, p.7).

Framing as a theory of media effect has been applied broadly to discourse in the media in a variety of ways. Fundamental to many of these studies was the use of a media frame as a dependent variable at either the individual or media level. At the audience level, frames as dependent variables have generally been analyzed as a direct outcome of a specific media frame of an issue (Gamson, 1992; Iyengar, 1991; Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997). Within public opinion research, framing effects have occurred when (even relatively minute) changes in issue presentation have produced (potentially large) changes in public opinion (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004).

At the media level, the framing of an issue may be influenced by a variety of individual, ideological, or organizational variables and thus can be examined as a dependent variable based on a number of independent variable inputs (Scheufele, 1999). In order to reach this level of analysis at the media or individual level, media frames must first be identified in relation to a specific event, political actor, or issue (Entman, 2004). Frames have been developed in a plethora of communication studies including support for war (Dimitrova, Kaid, Williams, & Trammell, 2005), opinions about stem cell research (Nisbet, Brossard, & Kroepsch, 2003), responsibility for the obesity epidemic (Lawrence, 2004), and cynicism toward the government (Brewer & Sigelman, 2002) among many others.

Though conflict between the educational mission of the academy and the commercial pull of intercollegiate athletics has been a topic of public discourse since the inception of intercollegiate athletics within the American university (Chu, Segrave, & Becker, 1985; Rader, 1999), the number of issues and strength of the reformer voice seemed to be reaching a turning point in the early 2010s with dominant issues, including unprecedented spending (Knight Commission, 2009; 2010; Weight, Weight, & Schneider, 2013), a call for additional athlete compensation (Benford, 2007; Forde, 2011; *O'Bannon v. NCAA*, 2009; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998), and a win-at-all-costs mentality placing the commercial and competitive pressure to win ahead of the academic mission of the university (Enlinson, 2013; McCormick & McCormick, 2006; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998; Sperber, 2000; Zimbalist, 1999).

Within this study, the interplay between public discourse and the construction of the media frame is not addressed, but rather the media frames encompassing issues within intercollegiate athletics is addressed as this is a first step in the development of media frame research within the context of intercollegiate athletics. By examining the prevalence, content, and tone of an entire year of front-page output within five major newspapers, a foundation of understanding relative to the messages being broadly portrayed can be established. This understanding and the identification of media frames in intercollegiate athletics coverage can serve as a launch pad for future research utilizing this theory as an independent or dependent variable at the media and audience levels (Scheufele, 1999). Specific research questions addressed are as follows:

R1: What is the prevalence of intercollegiate athletics coverage on the front pages of major newspapers in the United States?

R2: What is the content of intercollegiate athletics coverage on the front pages of major newspapers in the United States related to the independent variables of sport type and gender?

R3: What is the tone of intercollegiate athletics coverage on the front pages of major newspapers in the United States related to independent variables of "critical," "supportive," and "informational"?

R4: Are there statistical relationships between tone and content of intercollegiate athletics coverage on the front pages of major newspapers in the United States?

R5: Based upon R1-R4, what media frames are evident within the front page discourse surrounding intercollegiate athletics?

Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative content analysis methods were utilized in order to address the specific research questions pursued within this study related to

prevalence, content, and tone of intercollegiate athletic coverage. Content analysis has been widely utilized in communication framing and sport management research, and is the most appropriate form of analysis for the research questions in this study.

Strict adherence to content analysis methodology was utilized in order to maximize reliability and validity measures. Reliability was addressed through operationalizing concepts in the study protocol through precise coding sheets, trained coders, and multiple rounds of independent coding (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Inter-coder reliability measures were taken on two samples of data equating in total to approximately 20% of the content. In each measure, the coefficient related to corrections for chance agreement measured through Scotts Pi was greater than .90, providing strong evidence of reliability (Andrew, Pedersen, & McEvoy, 2011; Riffe et al., 2005). Support for face validity was gathered through a review of coding sheets by a panel of experts (Folger, Hewes, & Poole, 1984) including two researchers trained in content analysis methodology research, a qualitative research specialist from the *Odum Institute of Social Science Research*, and two practicing journalists. Validity was also addressed through the comprehensive sample of an entire year of coverage. Archived print versions of the newspapers were accessed utilizing the *Factiva electronic archive and Newspaper Source Plus* and downloaded into NVivo software to aid with data organization and analysis.

Quantitative units of analysis include prevalence indicators of intercollegiate athletics coverage in word count and article frequency and content-related demographic measures of gender and sport-type coverage. Articles analyzed within the study were included based on the specificity of the content within the article. College sport-related references within articles not devoted to the topic of collegiate athletics were not included in the study. There were several occasions in which an article covered multiple sports or multiple tones. In these circumstances, the article was tallied within each of the coding subcategories, which raised the total number of articles and/or word count slightly above the cumulative total.

Qualitative units of analysis include thematic coding categories covering elements of article tone with three general coding categories and nine emergent subcategories as listed in parentheses:

1. **Critical.** Questioning or bringing to light flaws related to the current intercollegiate athletic system or players within the system (e.g., scandal, reform, financial issues, student-athlete exploitation).
2. **Supportive.** Highlighting positive aspects of the current intercollegiate athletic system or players within the system (e.g., values, education, leadership outcomes of intercollegiate athletics).
3. **Informational.** Neutral tone: reporting facts with limited annotation or context related to the intercollegiate athletic system or players within the system (e.g., game or coach preview, review, or matchup; informational topic related to intercollegiate athletics)

In addition to drawing inferences based on coded thematic content, Chi Square analysis tests of independence were utilized in order to analyze the distribution of content coverage based on the independent variable of sport.

Results

Prevalence of Intercollegiate Athletics Coverage

Analysis of front-page articles uncovered a very small percentage of overall intercollegiate athletic coverage with .35% ($N = 31$) of articles devoted to issues in intercollegiate athletics while 1.97% ($N = 174$) were devoted to coverage of sport-related topics. Seventeen percent of the front-page articles related to sport, therefore, were college-sport related. The *USA Today* had the highest overall percentage of both sport-related (6.82%) and college-sport related (1.64%) articles, while the *New York Times* had the least sport-related (.15%) and college-sport-related (.05%) articles. Table 1 provides a complete breakdown of intercollegiate athletics coverage within the five newspapers utilized within the study.

Table 1

Prevalence of Intercollegiate Athletics Coverage on the Front Page of Major Newspapers in the United States

	Front-Page Articles (#)	Sport- Related Articles (#)	Sport- Related Articles (%)	College- Sport Articles (#)	College- Sport Articles (%)
<i>Wall Street Journal</i> (M-Sat)	2,490	82	3.29%	5	0.20%
<i>USA Today</i> (M-F)	792	54	6.82%	13	1.64%
<i>New York Times</i>	2,009	3	0.15%	1	0.05%
<i>Washington Post</i>	2,307	7	0.30%	2	0.09%
<i>New York Post</i>	1,254	28	2.23%	10	0.80%
Total	8,852	174	1.97%	31	0.35%

*Organized by distribution (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2011)

Content of Intercollegiate Athletics Coverage

College sport coverage was dominated by men's sport with 97% of the articles and 98% of the words featuring almost entirely football and men's basketball. Football led coverage with exposure in 61.29% ($n = 19$) of the college-sport related articles and was the only sport to be covered by all five newspapers. Men's basketball was second with 38.71% ($n = 12$) of the articles. Of the thirty-one articles related to intercollegiate athletics, only two deviated from these two dominant sports with one article mentioning a men's Olympic sport (wrestling) and one story covering women's basketball.

The coverage of wrestling was housed within a story related to synthetic marijuana use within the Naval Academy on the football and wrestling teams and con-

tained only sixty six words directly related to the sport (DeVise, 2011). The story related to women's basketball was about the academic ban related to the NCAA's academic progress rate (APR). It listed three Division I women's basketball teams and 10 men's basketball schools in the NCAA tournament with a team APR below 925, which indicates less than half of the players are on track to graduate (Brady, 2011). There were no front-page articles related to female Olympic sports. There were two nonsubstantive mentions of female Olympic athletes (e.g., an article that discussed a woman who was a former NCAA track athlete); however, no college-sport related articles contained discussion of women's Olympic sport. Table 2 presents a comprehensive breakdown of sport and gender coverage by article and word count.

Table 2

Content of Front-Page Intercollegiate Athletics Coverage

	Article Count (#)	Article Count (%)	Word Count (#)	Word Count (%)
Football	19	61.29%	15,507	73.68%
Men's Basketball	12	38.71%	5,013	23.82%
Women's Basketball	1	3.23%	459	2.18%
Men's Olympic Sports	1	3.23%	66	0.31%
Women's Olympic Sports	0	0.00%	0	0.00%

Tone of Intercollegiate Athletics Coverage

The vast majority of intercollegiate athletics coverage was classified as “critical” in nature, with 80.36% or 25 articles questioning or bringing to light flaws related to the current system or players within the system. Roughly 32.26% of the articles (noting several multi-toned articles), were classified as “informational” in nature ($n = 10$) comprising a neutral tone wherein facts were reported within the context of intercollegiate athletics with limited annotation related to the system or players within the system. The majority of these informational articles included game previews or reviews with a few other informational topics covered including fundraising fundamentals within the university. Many of the multi-classified articles included information about the system in the context of a critical commentary. No articles or references within the sample were deemed “supportive” in nature; thus, no positive aspects of the current intercollegiate athletic system or players within the system were highlighted on the front page of these news sources in the 2011 calendar year.

Table 3*Tone of Front-Page Intercollegiate Athletics Coverage*

	Article Count (#)	Article Count (%)	Word Count (#)	Word Count (%)
Critical	25	80.65%	19,233	77.10%
Informational	10	32.26%	5,714	22.91%
Supportive	0	0.00%	0	0.00%

Within the “critical” themed articles, nine subcategories emerged through the analysis. Financial exorbitance within intercollegiate athletics dominated both the article and word reference count as discussed within 14 articles and 8,027 words, accounting for 31.11% of the article references and 41.74% of the word references. Following this category, a discrepancy between the article and word count makes it difficult to know what the most prevalent themes were. Relying on article references, the next two most heavily discussed critical themes include conflict between athletics and the academy (13.33%), and athlete discipline problems (13.33%) each with references in six articles. Closely following this category in article reference frequency included five references to athlete entitlement comprising 11.11% of the article reference count (see Table 4). Following the financial exorbitance category by word reference count, the most heavily discussed topics included scandal (18%), athlete compensation (12.03%), and conference realignment (10.25%).

Table 4*“Critical” Themes in Front-Page Intercollegiate Athletics Coverage*

	Article Reference Count (#)	Article Reference Count (%)	Word Reference Count (#)	Word Reference Count (%)
Financial Exorbitance	14	31.11%	8,027	41.74%
Scandal	3	6.67%	3,461	18.00%
Pay-For-Play	2	4.44%	2,314	12.03%
Conference Realignment	3	6.67%	1,971	10.25%
Conflict between Athletics and Academe	6	13.33%	1,034	5.38%
Athlete Entitlement	5	11.11%	795	4.13%
Athlete Discipline Problems	6	13.33%	665	3.46%
Coach Power	3	6.67%	508	2.64%
Hyper-competitive	3	6.67%	458	2.38%

Results of the chi-square analysis comparing critical and informational coverage by the dominant sports of football and basketball revealed significant predictability between the tone of coverage between the sports utilizing both article ($\chi^2 = 7.83, p < .01$) and word count ($\chi^2 = 3,198.09, p < .001$) measures. Football coverage was significantly more likely to be critical in nature than the coverage of men's basketball (see Table 5).

Table 5*Tone of Front-Page Intercollegiate Athletics Coverage by Sport*

Tone	Article Reference Count			Word Reference Count		
	Sport		χ^2	Sport		χ^2
	Football	M Basketball		Football	M Basketball	
Critical	39 (2.8)	8 (-2.8)	7.83*	16,615 (56.4)	2,898 (-56.4)	3198.09**
Informational	3 (-2.8)	5 (2.8)		980 (-56.4)	1,623 (56.4)	

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$

Note. Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.

Discussion and Implications

Several researchers have documented the powerful role the media plays in shaping the public perceptions related to issues, individuals, and organizations (Bennett & Serrin, 2005; Lippmann, 1922; Scheufele, 1999). As such, stakeholders of the college sport industry need to understand the dominant themes surfacing in the media for a variety of reasons. From a scholarly paradigm, an understanding of the quantified content within the press will help to shape research initiatives and potential reform efforts within intercollegiate athletics. From a managerial standpoint, it is important for industry stakeholders to understand the public perception in order to tackle issues of concern and influence messages being relayed to the public. From an ethical, legal, and societal perspective, the perception of intercollegiate athletics needs to be reconciled with the reality of the industry. A firm understanding of media coverage can begin this process of reconciliation.

Prevalence and Content of Intercollegiate Athletics Coverage

Results indicate the intercollegiate athletics industry to be a relatively small area of emphasis in the front-page news media. While those entrenched in the sport industry often feel high visibility given the tremendous amount of television coverage and devotion to the industry given its own newspaper section and plethora of cable channels, the amount of front-page coverage was quite small. Comprising less than .4% of overall article coverage, it appears that most inter-

collegiate athletics-related articles are relegated to the sports section rather than holding a position as the subject of headline news on the front page. Given that college sport garnered 17% of all front-page sport-related coverage, this limited front-page coverage appears to be consistent with other sport sectors.

Based upon the content analysis, the coverage of intercollegiate athletics is completely male dominated, with nearly 98% of word count devoted to men's sport, with roughly 74% covering football, and 24% covering men's basketball. These findings support much of the literature that has cited male dominance in the popular press (Bryant, 1980; Cunningham et al., 2004; Duncan et al., 1991; Huffman et al., 2004; Kinnick, 1998; Luebke, 1989; Matheson & Flatten, 1996; Reville, 1994; Shifflet, Theberge, & Cronk, 1986), but these figures are far more extreme than those seen within previous studies as front page coverage within a broad sample has not been the subject of inquiry to date. This minute amount of front-page coverage for those who generally do not read the sports section, then, becomes even more catalytic in shaping public perception (Bennett & Serrin, 2005; Lippman, 1922) as this may be the extent of information gathered about this industry. Based upon the media frames uncovered through analysis of the article tone within this research, the message being relayed to the public about intercollegiate athletics is cause for concern in practical, scholarly, and societal paradigms.

Tone of Intercollegiate Athletics Coverage

While roughly a quarter of word count content and a third of article content was devoted to informational pieces surrounding the industry, which is to be expected, an incredibly troubling finding of this inquiry was the complete lack of articles deemed "supportive" in nature; articles heralding positive aspects of the industry or players within the industry. Given a foundational view of intercollegiate athletics as an element of institutions of higher education (Frey, 1982; Rader, 1999; Shulman & Bowen, 2001), one might expect at least a single article or paragraph devoted to educational outcomes or positive effects of the system. Perhaps this can be related to the literature citing a sensationalistic slant in the news media, (Bennett & Serrin, 2005; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011), the established frames within the media or current public dialogue, or front-page news reserved for articles with an attention-grabbing (and potentially alarming) tone. Regardless of the rationale, the reality remains the dominant tone of articles related to intercollegiate athletics were those deemed critical in nature, founded on the intent of bringing to light flaws within the current operating system. Based upon this analysis, nine media frames were identified (see Table 4) and their corresponding themes will be explored in the following paragraphs.

As noted above, financial exorbitance was the frame that dominated discourse related to intercollegiate athletics on the front page throughout 2011. These articles presented data outlining the lavish expenditures and associated deficits surrounding the industry. Berkowitz and Upton (2011) presented the most thorough finan-

cial analysis outlining a \$470 million increase in spending within Football Bowl Subdivision athletics programs despite the difficult economy and an \$11.3 million median net deficit for the 98 schools that were not self-sufficient during this time frame. Other themes within this frame included the steady dramatic increases in coaching salaries (Upton, 2011), the push for sophisticated sales techniques as athletic departments “scramble for revenue” (Berkowitz, 2011, p. 01A); and the heavy financial reliance athletics programs have on student fees (Marklein, 2011). This frame is representative of a rich history and growing body of research into the arms race of expenditures (Knight Commission, 2009; 2010; Weight, Weight & Schneider, 2013), which university presidents have deemed a system that cannot be sustained (Knight Commission, 2009). In concert with these discussions of escalating revenues and expenditures were discussions of conference realignment (Weiberg & Berkowitz, 2011), and athlete compensation (Weiberg, 2011).

Pay-for-play has become a contentious staple in the intercollegiate athletics dialogue as the collective voice of critics combined with in-progress lawsuits have made their way into the headlines (Benford, 2007; Forde, 2011; *O'Bannon v. NCAA*, 2009; Sack & Staurowsky, 1998). Primary to this debate is the NCAA's foundational principle of amateurism, which defines participation in intercollegiate athletics as an “avocation” (NCAA Division I Manual, 2012, p.4). Weiberg (2011) captured the tenuous stance the NCAA has been passionately advocating through two separate quotations by NCAA president Mark Emmert in a *USA Today* article. The first statement includes Emmert championing the traditional NCAA stance by stating, “it's grossly unacceptable and inappropriate to pay players...converting them from students to employees” (2011, p. 01A). Shortly thereafter within the article, Weiberg marks a new approach that has provided fuel to the discussion that undoubtedly will continue throughout this decade. “Emmert acknowledges it's time for a serious discussion about whether and how to spread a little more of the largesse to those who are doing the playing and sweating... ‘the sooner, the better’” (Emmert, qtd. in Weiberg, 2011, p. 01A). As the domino effect of Conference realignment coalesced during the time frame of this study, financial drivers and implications of the realignment decisions were discussed in concert with the athlete payment issue (Weiberg & Berkowitz, 2011).

The next most prevalent themes and associated frames are representative of the foundational issues, identity, and public perception problems currently faced by the industry of intercollegiate athletics (Nocera, 2012). Several articles addressed conflict between athletics and the academy (e.g., Weiberg & Berkowitz, 2011) with the context of these conflicts rooted in the hyper-competitive nature of the industry (e.g., Berkowitz, 2011; Vaccaro, 2011), coach power (e.g., Albergotti, 2011), and subsequent win-at-all-costs mentality often resulting in scandal, athlete entitlement (e.g., Albergotti, 2011; Bernstein, 2011), and athlete discipline problems (e.g., Bernstein, 2011; Livingstone, 2011). These themes and associated consequences often place the university, the athletics department, and the athletics boosters in conflicting positions, which have led to precarious justification for

unethical conduct. Andy Geiger, former athletics director at Ohio State University, described this precarious conundrum, between the commercial and academic priorities of the university with various competing stakeholders often wielding their power. “We’ve created I was going to say a blurry line, but I don’t think there is any line anymore as to who’s in charge” (qtd. in Weiberg & Berkowitz, 2011).

This inquiry was conducted throughout the year of the Penn State football scandal, and as such, three articles covered the Penn State situation, and several other articles referenced this and other NCAA investigations that occurred. A recurring theme surrounding the coverage of these cases was the coalescence between coach power, athlete discipline problems, and athlete entitlement. An article exploring the institutional power struggle between Coach Paterno and institutional administrators related to athlete discipline problems highlighted several of the themes supporting the media frames outlined within this study. The article outlined a system of entitlement wherein football players were “getting in trouble at a disproportionate rate from other students, often for serious acts” (Albergotti, 2011, p. 01A), yet being treated more favorably than nonfootball players. When the university standards and conduct officer or a member of her department initiated an investigation into a football player, there would be an onslaught of recourse as coaches, board members, and others would demand an adjusted judicial process. The general sentiment was that players should not be treated as other students because they would have to testify, making it difficult to play football together. In the case of Penn State, Coach Paterno felt it should be “his call if someone should practice and play in athletics” (Albergotti, 2011, p. 01A). These frames of athlete discipline problems and entitlement support scholarly research (Benedict & Yaeger, 1998) and were echoed in several articles referencing cases of sexual assault, assault, and drug use wherein “there exists a culture of entitlement for athletes or teams” (A. Kiss qtd. in Bernstein, 2011, p. A1) with “university cultures demand[ing] silence” (Albergotti, 2011, p. 01A).

As noted within the results section, analysis of independence through the use of chi-square provides additional context to the intercollegiate athletics frames presented through the newspaper coverage analyzed within the study. While much of men’s basketball article coverage (38%) was related to game previews, particularly during March Madness, only 5% of football coverage was informational in nature, with the vast majority of football coverage (95% of word count) being critical in nature. Another interesting preliminary finding, limited by sample size relative to article tone by sport revealed differences in subthemes. “Critical” basketball articles primarily focused on exorbitant spending, pay-for-play issues, and academic issues. The football articles, on the other hand, were much more geared toward covering scandal, athlete discipline problems, and a culture of entitlement, with only a few game or coach previews. These observations lend toward the development of a potential sport-specific frame hypothesis that would be interesting to explore in future analyses.

Conclusions

The extreme results uncovered within this research demonstrating a complete disregard for men's Olympic and women's sport coverage in front-page coverage add unique support to a hypothesis that the media is presenting a very narrow view of intercollegiate athletics as a whole. The findings of this analysis outline a broad media presentation of an industry characterized by lavish spending and unpaid workers within men's basketball, and indulgence of entitled athletes and widespread corruption facilitating unpunished criminal activity in football. These broad themes support many of the initiatives instigated by long-standing and newly organized reform groups including the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, the National College Players Association, the Drake Group, the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, and the National Coalition against Violent Athletes to name a few.

Several researchers have documented the powerful role the media plays in shaping the public perceptions related to issues, individuals, and organizations (e.g., Scheufele, 1999). With this knowledge, we must question whether the media is serving as a watchdog or source of sensationalism (Bennett & Serrin, 2005). The breadth of reform organizations listed above founded by those close to the heart of the industry provides support for the hypothesis that the media is playing a watchdog role, yet the initiatives pursued by these organizations are largely in response to issues related to a small fraction of participants in intercollegiate athletics (NCAA Division I-FBS men's basketball and football players).

Many of the uncovered frames and frame-themes are supported by strong bodies of literature and can be refined through further testing and empirical development. This is a worthy scholarly pursuit due to the tremendous practical, philosophical, ethical, legal, and societal implications. As such, stakeholders in the industry of college sport need to analyze and understand the dominant themes surfacing in the media for a variety of reasons in order to tackle issues of concern and proactively influence messages being relayed to the public. Of particular concern, perhaps, is the impression these messages relay to the casual nonsport fan observers who may form their frames of the industry through these limited front-page messages. The implications of continued critical messages is troubling, particularly to colleges and universities that are not money-making entities. If the general public develops a poor opinion of college sport, programs that are largely funded by tax dollars and student fees may be in perilous positions.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This article outlined nine media frames that surfaced within front-page coverage of intercollegiate athletics throughout the 2011 calendar year. This research was constrained by the limitation of a one-year time period and limited source of data drawing on just front-page coverage within five major newspapers within the

United States. While this provides a rich sample from which to begin media frame analysis within the context of intercollegiate athletics coverage in the news media, it would be interesting to compare the coverage, content, tone, and media frames explored within this study to those in other years and other media. A comparison of coverage between years or decades, for instance, would provide an indication of frame development, strengthening the utilization of this theoretical framework as “framing is best conceptualized as a process that evolves over time” (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Similarly, a comparison between content aimed to draw mass appeal in the front page compared to content within the sports section or an on-line medium could also provide additional depth to the journalistic frames and rationale behind these frames.

This study also provides a foundation upon which to build scholarly research investigating these frames as dependent variables from both the individual and media perspective. A critical next step for the development of this foundational research would be to analyze the attitudes and behaviors surfacing from media frame exposure by conducting pre- and post-tests of varying attitudes toward a number of these frames with exposure to an article as the scientific manipulation. Alternatively, an investigation into journalists and other media representatives’ attitudes, experiences, and behaviors driving the packaging of their stories could provide additional depth into the creation and refinement of these frames.

Weiberg and Berkowitz (2011) provided a glimpse into a paradigm driving their journalistic frame in an article exploring conference realignment. They write, “Gene DeFilippo backpedaled quickly—an old quarterback executing one more scramble—after suggesting last month that one of the most stunning shifts in the recent wave of realignment in college sports had been scripted by ESPN” (p. 01A). This statement could connote the (often unintentional) biases that shape the creation of media frames (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Research into these journalistic paradigms could add a tremendous amount of depth to the frames identified within this research. Finally, in order to gain a broader understanding of the interplay between media and public discourse, it would also be beneficial to research discourse related to stories presented in the media through researching online comments and/or conducting focus group research related to the frames outlined within this study (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; McLeod et al., 1987).

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