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MASS MEDIA, ACCOUNTS, AND COHERENCE:
'DE FACTO' IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT OF A TRANSGRESSING SPORT
STAR IN *THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE*

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Degree
Masters of Arts in Sociology
The University of Tennessee at Knoxville

Erin Maureen Austin

December 2007

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated in memory of H.M. Knarr, Jr.

His compassion, love, and strength that he gave to my family and me
will never be forgotten.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people that I would like to thank for helping me finish this project. I am particularly thankful to my Thesis Committee, which consisted of Dr. Lois Presser, Dr. Suzanne Kurth, and Dr. Stephanie Bohon. Their feedback, encouragement, and guidance were invaluable to the success of this project.

I would also like to express my thanks and appreciation to my family, particularly to my parents Deb and Mark Austin, to my brother Andy, to my sister Maggie, and to my boyfriend James Morrison for their continued love and support. Without their wishes, hopes, hugs, and kisses, I would have not had the strength to pull through.

ABSTRACT

Using the Kobe Bryant sexual assault case as an example, this thesis attempts to understand how the media, specifically *The Chicago Tribune*, maintain the consistency of a certain representation given changing or new information. A full analysis of all 274 news articles found in *The Chicago Tribune* from June 30, 2003 (the date the alleged sexual assault took place) through August 31, 2004 (the day before the charges were dismissed), revealed five devices by which journalists managed Bryant's image. These devices are: (1) case is not paramount, (2) case is hindering basketball, (3) external lures are to blame, (4) silver lining in the allegations, and (5) "court-to-the-court." The *Tribune* writers used these devices in order to maintain the newspaper's credibility as a consistent news source. The newspaper's credibility was salvaged through reconstruction efforts to reconcile Bryant's prior, positive persona with the current reality of the sexual assault allegations.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

How do mass media outlets maintain credibility? In particular, how do they maintain a consistent line about an issue or person? How do they reconcile a certain position or depiction with changing or new information? To address these questions, this thesis will examine one newspaper's reports on the sexual assault case of Los Angeles Lakers Basketball player Kobe Bryant. *The Chicago Tribune*, in its need to maintain credibility, provided a favorable reconstruction of Kobe Bryant while he was facing the sexual assault allegation. It is important to understand why the media construct and reconstruct persons in the news since the information they provide are the basic building blocks on how other individuals view the world.

Kobe Bryant, Celebrity Athlete

On June 30, 2003 Bryant was accused of sexually assaulting a 19-year old employee at the Lodge & Spa at Cordillera in Edwards, Colorado (Kohler 2003). Eagle County District Attorney Mark Hurlbert eventually dismissed the charges on September 1, 2004 after the accuser decided that she did not want to go forward with prosecution (Henson and Pugmire 2004).

Kobe Bryant is the son of Pamela and Joe Bryant (Markoe 2002). Joe Bryant played professional basketball for the Italian Professional Basketball League (Markoe 2002) after playing professionally for the Philadelphia 76ers (Porter 2005). Bryant graduated from Lowe Merion High School in Ardore, Pennsylvania in 1996 (Porter 2005). During his senior year, he led the team to the state championship, became the all-

time leading scorer in Pennsylvania for high school basketball, and was named the High School Player of the Year by *USA Today* and *Parade* magazine (Porter 2005). After deciding to not attend college, Bryant entered his name into the National Basketball Association Draft. He was selected by the Charlotte Hornets as the 13th overall pick in 1996, becoming the 6th player in history to enter the NBA straight from high school (Porter 2005). Bryant was later traded to the Los Angeles Lakers on July 11, 1996 (Porter 2005).

On November 3, 1996, at the age of eighteen, Bryant became the youngest player in professional basketball history (Markoe 2002). In his first year as a member of the Los Angeles Lakers, Bryant was named to the NBA All-Rookie Second Team. During the 1997-1998 season, Bryant was the highest scoring non-starter in the NBA, the highest scoring reserve in Los Angeles Lakers history (Porter 2005), and was voted into his first All-Star game where he won “the slam dunk contest,” a widely accepted indicator of skill (Markoe 2002). According to Porter (2005), in the 1998-2000 season, Bryant started every game and was named to the All-NBA Third Team. In 1999-2000, he helped to lead the Lakers to an NBA championship title. During the 2000-2001 season he was named the NBA Player of the Month for December, and helped to lead the Lakers to a second NBA title. Following the 2000-2001 season, Bryant married his fiancé Vanessa (Goodman 1999); two years later in 2003, the couple had their first child Natalia Diamante.

The Lakers third consecutive championship title came during the following 2001-2002 season where Bryant was named to the First Team All-NBA. He earned this distinction again during the 2002-2003 season, and was also named to the All-NBA

Defensive First Team, received the most votes for the 2003 All-Star game, made record-breaking twelve three-pointers in a single game, and became the youngest player in NBA history to reach 10,000 points for his career (Savage 2003). However, at the end of this season, the Lakers did not win their fourth consecutive title as the San Antonio Spurs defeated them in the championship finals.

Kobe Bryant's Pre-Allegation Characterization in *The Tribune*

In pre-allegation coverage of Kobe Bryant, *The Chicago Tribune* used a limited number of biographical particulars to create an overall virtuous persona for Bryant.¹ *The Chicago Tribune* emphasized aspects of his life that were namely positive: his family background, his athletic ability, and the attainment of a professional career at such a young age. This newspaper centered Bryant as having the ability to do almost anything on the basketball court. However, *The Chicago Tribune* acknowledged that at times Kobe was selfish and individualistic. Despite these two ascribed traits, *The Chicago Tribune* in general presented Bryant as a virtuous individual.²

News reports referenced Bryant's parents, Joe and Pam Bryant (Smith 1996), his marriage to high school student Vanessa Laine (Pitts 2000), and the birth of the couple's first child Natalia (*The Chicago Tribune*, January 21, 2003). Before Bryant was drafted into the National Basketball Association, he was frequently depicted as the "son of former professional basketball player Joe Bryant" who took his family to Italy when he

¹ This biographical sketch does not reflect upon how Kobe Bryant reacted to the media attention inflicted upon him. The biographical sketch features how *The Chicago Tribune* portrayed Kobe's persona.

² The mediated biographical sketch was compiled from *Chicago Tribune* articles from January 1, 1996 through June 30, 2003. In all, 1264 articles were briefly reviewed to compile the biography.

played there professionally (Smith 1996b: 3).³ Joe was also mentioned as a La Salle University assistant basketball coach (Smith 1996b). When Bryant decided to enter the NBA draft right out of high school Joe and Pam (his mother) were consulted (Smith 1996b). *The Chicago Tribune* made note that Bryant made the jump to the NBA with the help of his family (Sakamoto 2000), emphasizing that Bryant had helpful parents and a solid family background that would support him and his NBA career.

Bryant's engagement to Vanessa Laine was another particular *The Chicago Tribune* discussed. Emphasizing Bryant's roles as a husband and as a professional athlete, the newspaper supported the impression that Bryant was a devoted family man despite his demanding, high profile job. In an article on June 19, 2000, the newspaper noted that Bryant declined an invitation to participate in the 2000 Olympics in order to spend time with his soon-to-be wife stating, "I'm kind of leaning toward not going. There's a lot I'd like to do this summer, spend time with my family, get married, relax" (Smith 2000: 5). In other articles, during the 2001 NBA playoffs, Vanessa fell ill and was taken to the hospital; Bryant was able to take care of her while also fulfilling his role as a professional basketball player, as Beacham (2001), a *Chicago Tribune* writer, describes:

In a 48-hour span, Bryant played a phenomenal game, rushed home to Los Angeles to check on his wife's health, then hurried back to Sacramento for another amazing performance that put the Lakers in the conference finals. Bryant set career playoff bests with 48 points and 16 rebounds Sunday as the Lakers

³ Sam Smith is the "Tribune Pro Basketball Writer." Therefore, Smith was cited frequently for the construction of this mediated biography as he was the writer for many of the articles published by *The Chicago Tribune*.

advanced to their second straight Western Conference finals...Bryant found out hours before Friday's Game 3 that his wife, Vanessa, had been taken to an emergency room with a severe pain in her left side. After being assured by doctors that his wife had stabilized, Bryant scored 36 points in the Lakers' victory...(p. 7).

The Chicago Tribune also noted Bryant's management of competing demands on time with the birth of a daughter: "L.A. Clippers 92 at L.A. Lakers 96. Kobe Bryant, wearing a hospital bracelet after birth of his daughter, Natalia, on Sunday, had 26 points, 11 assists" (*The Chicago Tribune*, January 21, 2001: 8).

Bryant married Vanessa when he was 22 years old (*The Chicago Tribune*, April 21, 2001). Bryant was also very young – age 17 – when he was drafted into the NBA. Articles in *The Chicago Tribune* made a point of recognizing (sometimes humorously) that Kobe was so young, even child-like, and his work should qualify as "child labor" (Lincicome 1998: 1). In describing Bryant and his (in)abilities as a rookie, Smith (1997) hinted that Bryant "had to write on the Lakers' chalkboard 'I will not dunk or make a three every time I have the ball 300 times'" to decrease his tendencies to do so (p. 5). In another example, Wilstein (1997) states that Bryant still seems like a "kid in a toy shop," but is "getting quite an education" as one of the youngest rookies in the NBA (p. 9). Whether it is sitting patiently on the bench for the coach's instruction, fighting off women, or "pumping iron regularly in the weight room, trying to bulk up" his skinny body, "Bryant is still learning the ropes" of a celebrity life (p. 9).

An emphasis on Bryant's youth notwithstanding, *The Chicago Tribune* did not underestimate or devalue his athletic abilities. *The Chicago Tribune* recognized "the heir

Jordan kid guard” (Rosenbloom 1998: 2) and his athletic ability at this early stage in his career, even prior to his appearance in the NBA: “his athleticism, grace and end-to-end court savvy summon up comparisons to Anfernee Hardaway or Grant Hill” (Green 1996). “Bryant was a mature, worldly, family-oriented kid with an impressive basketball pedigree when Lakers executive vice president Jerry West drafted him” (Greenfield 1999: 5).

The observations of Bryant’s athletic ability did not stop there. Bryant, who “conquered the monster” (Myslenski 1999b: 1) of the NBA and blossomed at a young age, was only one of the dozen basketball players to become an “established star” right out of high school (Hooker 1999: 5). Following his first appearance as an All-Star in 1998 (Smith 1998), and his nomination for Lakers captain in 1999 (Smith 1999b), new players coming into the NBA were compared to Bryant, the way he himself was once compared to NBA players Anfernee Hardaway and Grant Hill (Green 1996).

Bryant was compared most frequently to one of basketball’s most recognized and famous players – Michael Jordan. Once the “majestic, magical, [and] mesmerizing” Michael Jordan announced his retirement from the NBA, there was much speculation about who his predecessor would be (Mylinski 1999: 4). Mylinski (1999) stated that at one time the predecessor “was Penny Hardaway of the Orlando Magic and then it was Grant Hill of the Detroit Pistons. More recently it has been Kobe Bryant of the Los Angeles Lakers” (p. 4).

However, the “next Michael Jordan” (Mylinski 1998: 7) was deemed a selfish and “precocious” player at times (Smith 1999: 3), and the comparison to Jordan did not seem to fit Bryant; he was a ball-hog “with a scandalous disregard for teammates” (Krikorian

1999: 3): “He is close to Jordan in his creativity and athletic skills, but his game remains undisciplined. He doesn’t truly know a good shot and still chooses the harder, fancy move when an economical choice is available. Considers it an insult to shoot a lay-up” (Smith 2000c: 8).

News writers at *The Chicago Tribune* felt that Bryant needed better direction, and this direction would come from Coach Phil Jackson, acquired by the Lakers in 1999 as the new head coach (Caldarelli 1999). “Now it’s up to [Jackson] to turn around a talented but troubled Los Angeles Lakers team. ‘Shaq’ and Bryant appeared as if they were playing on different teams last season. The selfish play eventually doomed the Lakers as they were swept out of the playoffs for the second straight year” (Caldarelli 1999: 1). Lincicome (1999) stated that the new Lakers coach “is a facilitator, sort of a perfect master of ceremonies... He managed to make Jordan effectively unselfish, no small feat. If he can do it with Jordan, he ought not to have that much trouble with Kobe Bryant” (p. 1). Prior to his arrival, individualism and feuding occurred on regular basis, but “Jackson has brought responsibility and professionalism to the Lakers. Gone is the chest bumping and preening after baskets. Gone is the jealousy, the Kobe-Shaq feud, the individualism” (Smith 2000b: 3). Following Jackson’s arrival, Bryant had “become [one of] the brightest stars in the NBA” (Smith 2000b: 3).

Jackson’s coaching style harnessed Bryant’s basketball abilities. Jackson made Bryant a better basketball player through his one-on-one defense and his intelligent approach to offense. However, at times Bryant continued play as a solo and not a team player: “It’s a selfish kind of narcissistic way to play ball,” noted Jackson, “and in some ways too selfish for the type of ball we play” (Smith 2000b: 1). Over the next four

seasons through 2003, the paper reported many spats between Bryant and his teammates; the reports centered on Bryant's selfishness and individualism. Bryant revealed himself to be somewhat of a "recluse who never goes anywhere" (Smith 2001b: 16). "Bryant is young, and different," notes Smith (2000b), "he is a loner, rarely socializing or mixing with his teammates" (p. 1). However, this depiction of Bryant swung two ways in *The Chicago Tribune*; when Bryant was performing at the top of his game, his "loner" personality was characterized in a more positive way, as he was described as "a basketball junkie who studies tapes while teammates go to nightclubs" (Smith 2001: 6).

Bryant's apparent aloofness caused strife between him and some of his teammates, including Shaq, who "doubted whether the team could win with Bryant's penchant for individuality" (Smith 2001c: 8). Even with Bryant and Shaq playing like "infants in a sandbox" (Smith 2001e), the Lakers became one of the best teams in the NBA. As long as the Lakers were successful, and the "greatest inside/outside tandem in NBA history" (Smith 2002) were playing well, it appeared that many, including the Lakers organization and the media, were content to handle whatever conflicts might arise between Shaq and Bryant. "Bryant and O'Neal could wrestle on the floor" notes Smith (2001d), "but no one would claim it affects the team" (p.4).

Notwithstanding the strife, Smith (2000b) states that Bryant had become "the team's most athletic player and its best go-to guy. Bryant is so good, as Jordan was, that he often can" do just about anything on the court (p. 1). Off the court, Bryant made multi-million endorsement deals with the McDonalds Corporation (Kirk 2001) and Nike (*The Chicago Tribune*, June 25, 2003). It was just prior to this endorsement deal with Nike, that a slight tear around Bryant's right shoulder socket, possibly requiring surgery,

was discovered (*The Chicago Tribune*, June 6, 2003). This injury led him to seek surgery in Colorado, the site of Bryant's transgression.

Regarded as NBA material so early in his career, Bryant was built up to be a star. He wowed NBA organizations, fans, endorsers and sport writers alike; his young age, his supportive family background, and extraordinary basketball talent appealed to many. *The Chicago Tribune* emphasized these particulars, cultivating a virtuous persona for Kobe Bryant.

The Problematic of Allegations Against Bryant and the Mass Media

Allegations against Kobe Bryant were problematic for both him and those who had presented him in a particular (favorable) light. Kobe Bryant's alleged sexual assault was problematic because his image as "hero" (Klapp 1954) was and still is vital to his livelihood. In everyday life, according to Klapp (1954), the media make regular references to person types and place them into one of three generic figures: the hero, the villain, and the fool. Bryant was the hero type; he was a hero because of his athletic ability and professional achievements that set him apart from other individuals. The charges levied against him threatened to dethrone him of this hero type. If convicted of the crime alleged against him, Bryant would have faced penalties ranging from 20 years of closely supervised probation to a prison term of four years to life. (Reid 2004). A conviction would severely hurt his career as a professional basketball player, source of his celebrity and wealth. During the preliminary court appearances, Bryant signed a

seven-year, \$137 million dollar contract with the Lakers; a conviction would have voided this new contract and restrict him from playing in the NBA (Reid 2004).

The allegations alone can jeopardize endorsement deals, which are solely based upon attractiveness to a consuming audience. According to Kahle and Riley (2004), athlete endorsers must represent the positive characteristics that a company wants to project. Overall, athlete endorsers must be successful, talented, confident, and inspiring; they must also convey a winning attitude, healthy appearance, and general appeal to the consuming audience. In a sense, they must live up to the hero standard that is valued in mainstream American culture. Americans believe that people of Bryant's status and athletic abilities embody certain values such as "courage, expertise, perseverance, assertiveness, generosity, social ideals, dependability, honesty, and character" (Van de Berg 1998: 138). An athlete who does not portray these values, may cause companies to terminate a relationship with the athlete. Prior to the allegations, Bryant was a successful endorser with many well-known companies, such as McDonalds, Coca-Cola, and Nike. After the charges were alleged, McDonalds did not renew Bryant's contract and Coca-Cola replaced Bryant with another sport star (Boone and Kurtz 2005). Nike, whose contract with Bryant was worth \$45 million dollars (Boone and Kurtz 2005), did not release Bryant's own signature shoe to the public (Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton 2007).

Aside from Kobe Bryant, there is another image that is also at stake in such allegations – the news media's image of credibility. Credibility is of primary concern for news organizations, and consistency in news reporting is a factor that aids in the maintenance of this credibility (Chen and Meindl 1991). The mediated images of Bryant's persona prior to the sexual assault allegations would seem to have been difficult

for media organizations to back away from, as they have commitments to themselves and their constituents to remain credible. The legitimacy of the news media rests, in part, on maintaining consistent or coherent news reports (Chen and Meindl 1991). So, the question remains: what happens when there is a change in a “hero” image? Does this change undermine the credibility of the media?

Statement of the Research Question

The research question this study will address is: How do mass media outlets, in an attempt to maintain credibility, reconcile a certain position or depiction with changing or new information? The information provided in this thesis will allow the reader to understand how *The Chicago Tribune* salvaged their portrayal of the erstwhile persona of Kobe Bryant while at the same time maintaining their credibility as a consistent news source.

The media shape our understanding of the world – and from there, behavior (Adler and Adler 1989) – through selective representation of certain events. Information from all across the world has become increasingly accessible. In such a large, ambiguous, and shifting world, this information is valuable, as individuals are unable to witness many events first-hand. We rely on media (e.g., television and the Internet) for much of the information we obtain about the world (Thompson 1999). The knowledge produced through the media has a significant influence on human behavior and society, as social order is only possible because there are shared symbols, concepts, images, and language (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987). In particular, “the news” is an important

institution in the production of knowledge (Ericson et al. 1987), and “builds expectations of a common, shared world” (Schudson 2003: 12). This dominant force in the construction of a common experience shapes understandings of important issues in society, such as racism, rape, violence, poverty and welfare, and AIDS. Indeed, news reports tell us *what* issues are important and why.

In order to understand issues of general concern, individuals categorize people, things, and events (Tajfel and Turner 1986). These categories organize the social environment. They provide us with a means of defining ourselves and others (Ashforth and Mael 1989). The creation of discrete categories allows us to manage potentially infinite amounts and combinations of information (Tajfel and Turner 1986). In contemporary Western society, we categorize people, for example, in terms of their age, gender, education, income, and marital status (Loseke 2003).

The media shape our understandings of the world, in part, through the characterization or typification of people. Perhaps accommodating our own tendencies to typify, or perhaps for institutional reasons (e.g., space limitations), and probably for both reasons, the media create types of people when discussing social issues (Loseke 2003). In order for the media to convince audiences of the veracity of a report about an event, the media must typify people, things and events in ways that are *recognizable* within the culture. These typifications (“hero,” “fool,” “drug dealer,” “prostitute,” “athlete,” “mother,” “abused child,” and “teacher”) reduce infinite amounts of information about humans into recognizable, thus legitimate, categories (Loseke and Best 2003: 110).

However, in order for media-generated messages to be accepted, people must believe in media outlets’ credibility. Credibility is a paramount goal of any media

organization. A serious loss of credibility can be damaging to the reputation of a media organization (Lubunski 1978).⁴ Hirst and Patching (2005) state that a media organization's credibility rests on certain "codes," which include accountability, accuracy, balance and lack of bias, fairness, and objectivity (Hirst and Patching 2005). This thesis contends that consistency or coherence, within and between texts (e.g., newspaper articles), is another code that media outlets use in order to maintain their credibility and image. However, the literature on consistency in the media is more sparse than that concerning the other codes identified above.

Without accountable, accurate, fair, balanced, objective reporting and coherent text, an audience would not trust in the truthfulness of the information presented. With credibility undermined, a media outlet would cease to exist insofar as it depends economically on an audience attracted by claims of credibility (Fico and Drager 2001). If media outlets such as newspapers were unable to maintain credibility, then revenues would fall; advertisers would not invest in newspapers that offer unreliable and low-quality information to the public (Meyer 2004). In another example of the media's financial investment in credibility, if a newspaper produced false statements that defamed an individual, then the newspaper may be sued by the individual for libel – a statement that is false, but produced as fact, that defames, injures, or harms an individual (Glasser 2006). Libel lawsuits are costly for the media outlet, whether they win or lose (Lubunski 1987). Thus, I argue that for quite tangible reasons, media outlets salvage their own

⁴ An exception may be tabloid journalism. Tabloid journalism (such as the *National Enquirer*, the *Star*, and the *Globe*) is generally considered to be "synonymous with bad journalism" (Örenbring and Jönsson 2004: 283). Readers seem to accept what is presented in the tabloids as false, but still read it for entertainment purposes (Salwen and Anderson 1984).

credibility by assisting in impression management for an individual facing controversy and/or stigma.

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) is responsible for first formulating the concept of “impression management.” Goffman claims that people, actors in the social world, are concerned about their image – the impression that they make. Thus, these social actors must engage in impression management tactics and strategies to avoid looking bad. “In order to prevent the occurrence of incidents and the embarrassment consequent upon them, it will be necessary for all the participants in an interaction, as well as those who do not participate, to possess certain attributes and to express these attributes in practices employed for saving the show” (p. 212). Goffman’s (1959) conception is directed toward face-to-face interaction; hence, its applicability to media coverage of a person is limited. From this point forward, I will refer to the concept of “de facto” impression management. The media have no intrinsic interest in helping persons look bad, and indeed often do present people in just that way. Rather, the media may help ‘save the show’ for someone – to use Goffman’s expression – for the sake of preserving their own image and standing.

The case that this thesis undertakes – that of athlete Kobe Bryant – is illustrative of the media’s role in resolving a contradiction in their construction of Bryant’s persona. The media had generally presented Kobe Bryant as a virtuous individual. However, when the charges of sexual assault and infidelity were levied, the news media – and specifically *The Chicago Tribune* – assisted in de facto impression management on Bryant’s behalf. This allowed *The Chicago Tribune* to maintain its own credibility as a news source. Based on a qualitative content analysis of news articles published in *The*

Chicago Tribune from June 30, 2003 (the date that the alleged sexual assault took place) through August 31, 2004 (the day before the charges were dropped) obtained through a search of NewsBank, Inc., I illuminate specific strategies with which the media reconstructed Bryant's persona.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I submit that news reports use descriptive strategies to reconcile new and old representations of “problem persons” (Loseke 2003) when the two are very disparate. The principal task of my literature review is to lay out and examine the role played by the mass media, and other institutions and third parties, in representing events and people. More specifically and in order, this chapter’s literature review will discuss (1) how the mass media, and especially news organizations, shape our understanding of the world in which we live through the selective presentation of events and specifically through categorizations of persons; (2) the media’s need to be coherent within a single report and across reports on a single issue or person; and (3) how the media favorably reconstructs the images of media celebrities as they strive toward coherence.

THE MASS MEDIA

Through the selective representation of certain events, the media have great power. The mass media shape the knowledge that makes social order possible (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987). Discourse and stories conveyed by the media shape understandings, which in turn shape behavior (Adler and Adler 1989).

The Importance of the Mass Media for Understanding Issues

Knowledge is an essential component of human behavior: it allows for the shared understanding of the world, which allows people to engage in common social action

(Ericson et al. 1987). The production of knowledge is thus fundamental to the production and regulation of social activity, and social order is only possible because there are shared symbols, concepts, and images.

Prior to the development of mass media, most people's sense of the world was shaped through face-to-face interaction and oral traditions (Thompson 1999). The development of communication on a mass scale has created – at least in developed nations – a mediated society. Newspapers, television, radio, books, films and the Internet are omnipresent (Holmgren and Norton 1971). “The average person spends 2,700 hour per year watching TV or listening to the radio. That's 337 eight hour days... We spend another 900 hours with other media, including newspapers, books, magazines, film, home video, video games, and the Internet. That's about 3,600 hours of media use – more time than we spend on anything else, including working or sleeping” (Straubhaar and LaRose 2006: 3). Newspapers, television, radio, books, films and the Internet are widely and frequently accessed; they are omnipresent (Holmgren and Norton 1971).

As our environment has become larger, more complex, and more transitory, we must experience events second-hand, through others' interpretations, including their accounts, stories, and pictures (Thompson 1999). More than seventy years ago, Lippmann (1922) noted that we rely on others to form our beliefs about our world. “Our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported” (p. 79). Our dependence on others for our sample of reality may only have increased since the time of Lippmann's writing. Hall (1977) states:

As social groups and classes live...increasingly fragmented and sectionally differentiated lives, the mass media are more and more responsible (a) for providing the basis on which groups and classes construct an 'image' of the lives, meanings, practices, and values of *other* groups and classes, (b) for providing images, representations and ideas around which the social totality, composed of all these separate and fragmented pieces, can be coherently grasped as a *whole*. This is the first of the great culture functions of the modern media: the provision and the selective construction of social knowledge (pp. 340-341; emphasis in original).

We rely on the media, then, for knowledge about the world, though we may be aware only of their role in disseminating it (Ericson et al. 1987). Lippmann (1922) wrote that the mass media "put pictures in our heads," which are representations of the real world (p. 3). Similarly, fifty years later, Blumler and Gurevitch (1982) stated that the media are the building blocks, which structure people's views of the world. Negrine (1994) extends Blumler and Gurevitch's (1982) point by noting that although these building blocks co-operate with other political and social factors to direct how an individual grasps or understands a particular issue or event, the media "determine the limits of our knowledge and our perceptions of events and their causes" (p. 3).

Within the media, "news discourse is one of the most important means by which society comes to know itself" (Ericson et al. 1987: 15). The news allows individuals to build expectations of a shared world (Schudson 2003). It "promotes an emphasis on and a positive valuation of the new; endorses a historical mentality...and encourages a

progressive rather than cyclical or recursive sense of time,” and has become a “dominant force in the public construction of common experience and a popular sense of what is real and important” (Schudson 2003: 13). But reporting the news is not merely about reporting facts. If it were, then “presented with true and accurate facts the public would be able to determine for itself an attitude towards the subject under discussion” (Hirst and Patching 2005: 37). Rather, the media and their journalists interpret events for us (Hirst and Patching 2005). The information presented via television, radio, and newspapers is organized in such a way as to present events for understanding, arranging the context of the events to lessen confusion and uncertainty concerning what happened (Hayden 2003). The way in which the audience receives information begins to structure how the audience views what transpired (Entman 1993; Scheufele 1999; Pan and Kosicki 2001).

Scholars have studied the ways in which the news shapes understanding of important social issues in society, such as racism (Entman 1990), rape (Benedict 1992), violence (Best 1999), poverty and welfare (Gilens 1999; Hamill, Wilson, and Nisbett 1980), and AIDS (McAllister and Kitron 2003). I now turn to research on how media have influenced conceptions of these and other issues.

A structurally and culturally important issue within American society is race. The media are a powerful source of ideas about race. The media construct a definition of race and, in choice of coverage, tell us what “the problem of race” is – for example, racist discrimination or racial conflict. The latter shapes our understanding of who the victims of racism are (Marris and Thornham 2000: 273). In a study of local television news, Entman (1990) found that crime reporting made “Blacks look particularly threatening”

(p. 342). These images, according to Entman, feed white racism, at least among the portion of the white population most predisposed to racist attitudes.

Benedict (1992) demonstrates that stories about sexual violence against women in the media discredit victims. The author develops this argument by analyzing four sex crimes that became national news in the United States: the 1979 Greta and John Rideout marital rape cases; the 1983 gang rape of a woman in a bar called Big Dan's Bar; the 1986 sex-related killing of Jennifer Levin; and the 1989 gang rape and beating of the Central Park Jogger in New York City. Benedict (1992) found that coverage included myths about the victim. Both women in the Big Dan's and the Jennifer Levin murder were portrayed as promiscuous. Only in the case of the Central Park jogger was the victim portrayed sympathetically, arguably because she fit the rape myth of the innocent white woman assaulted by beast-like men. Benedict (1992) argues that the press portrayed the women in these trials as either the deserving "vamp" or the undeserving "virgin" (p. 23). The "vamp" is characterized as follows: "The woman, by her looks, behavior or generally loose morality, drove the man to such extreme of lust that he was compelled to commit the crime" (p. 23). The "virgin" rape victim is presented as follows: "The man, a depraved and perverted monster, sullied the innocent victim, who is now a martyr to the flaws of society" (p. 23). Benedict (1992) states that these depictions are harmful to rape victims and to women generally. The vamp image paints the woman as responsible for her own victimization, and the virgin image paints the woman as a total victim, perpetuating the idea that women can only belong to two categories: whores or fragile beings.

Violence is another concept whose meaning is influenced by the media in the United States. Best (1999) asks why so-called random crimes such as freeway shootings, gang violence, hate crimes, and stalking emerged as major topics early the 1990s and endure as cultural categories. He argues that while these crimes are neither new, epidemic, nor random (technically speaking), the language that the mass media uses to describe them makes them seem all these things, and from there shapes both individual behavior and public policies. For example, emphasizing the randomness of freeway violence (after three shootings on an L.A. freeway), the mass media proclaimed that there was a shooting rampage occurring on L.A. However, it soon became obvious that there was no mass shooting spree on L.A. highways and the media ceased reporting on the shootings; moral panic concerning the issue quickly faded. This example shows how the mass media shape perspectives on an “actual” phenomenon and emotions surrounding it. Journalists can construct reality in producing the news.

In an analysis of news magazines, Gilens (1999) demonstrates that the news media shape our understandings of poverty and welfare. Gilens (1999) examined 1,256 news articles in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* from 1950 to 1992. He found that Blacks have dominated news media images of the poor since the late 1960s. From 1967 through 1992, 57 percent of the poor people pictured in these three news magazines were Black, approximately twice the true proportion of Blacks among the nation’s poor. Gilens (1999) argues that race, refracted through the prism of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, is the central factor that informs and sustains white perceptions of welfare recipients and opposition to welfare spending. The news media

play a key role in keeping images of the undeserving Black poor among people's associations about public entitlements.

More direct influence of the news media on conceptions of the poor and assistance to the poor is revealed in a study conducted by Hamill, Wilson, and Nisbett (1980). These researchers randomly assigned subjects to read a short article versus reading no article. The article contained a vivid and unflattering description of a single mother of three living in New York City. This mother had been on welfare for thirteen years. After the subjects read the article, they were asked their reactions and beliefs concerning welfare. Members of the comparison group, who were not given the article to read, were asked the same question concerning their beliefs about welfare in general. Hamill et al. (1980) found that the subjects who read the unflattering article about the single mother expressed significantly more negative views of welfare recipients in general than those subjects who did not read the article. The authors' analysis shows that a single article about a single welfare mother can influence readers' views about welfare recipients in general.

News coverage of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) constructs shared meanings of the disease and of those who are considered as typically stricken with it. McAllister and Kitron (2003) compared print media coverage of AIDS with that of Lyme disease. The authors' examined the frequency of news attention of the two medical conditions to that of actual medical incidence between 1981 and 1993. The authors also examined the language of the news coverage.

McAllister and Kitron (2003) discovered differences in the print coverage of AIDS and Lyme disease. First, Lyme disease was "characterized with more whimsical

language than AIDS in its coverage” (McAllister and Kitron 2003: 48). McAllister and Kitron (2003) note that, in general, instead of stressing a feeling of dread or tragedy that accompanied many AIDS headlines (e.g., “Watching the Babies Die”), those pertaining to Lyme Disease were characterized with catchy headlines, plays on words, and puns (e.g., “Lyme Disease: What Makes it Tick?”). Such linguistic approaches gave to Lyme disease a relatively unthreatening image. Related to this difference, the way that the risk groups associated with each condition also differed. Lyme disease was portrayed as the disease of the “Yuppie, the active, the healthy, the pure,” while AIDS was portrayed as the disease of the “peripheral, the poor, the deviant, the morally ill” (p. 58). However, certain individuals who contracted AIDS, such as children and white heterosexuals, were presented as “innocent victims” of AIDS. Taken together, these distinctions in coverage of AIDS versus coverage of Lyme disease shaped illness stereotypes.

In short, the mass media shape understandings of the “real” world; the media are an institution that helps individuals in a particular society understand the world around them. It is certainly not the only institution that has such an effect – as, for instance, the family and schools convey understandings - but it is an important one. This thesis proceeds from the view that it is important to understand how the media shape individuals’ perceptions about types of people in news reports.

Possible Person Types

Categories allow us to structure and thus manage potentially infinite amounts of information. People can be placed into categories based in terms of their age, gender,

education, income, or marital status; it is uncommon to hear people being discussed without reference to one or more categories. Tajfel and Turner (1986) proposed *social identity theory*, stating that the discrete categories to which an individual may be said to belong (e.g., political affiliation, nationality, sports team, gender), provide a self-definition for that individual and provide the context in which one can evaluate other individuals as well. Each individual has a repertoire of such discrete category memberships that vary in relative overall importance depending on which categories are recognizable within the social context. For example, women are more likely to recognize, or consider salient, their identification as a woman when they are in a roomful of men.

The media make regular reference to person types. In 1954, Klapp stated that individuals are placed into one of three generic figures: the hero, the villain, and the fool. According to Klapp (1954) these types play a significant role in “institutions, movements, political regimes, historical periods and everyday life. When a person is called a hero, villain or fool, this has important implications for his status, influence and the kind of treatment he will receive” (p. 56). According to Klapp (1954), heroes are “personages, real or imaginary, who are admired because they stand out from others by supposed unusual merits or attainments” (p. 57). Descriptors such as “underdog, champ, protector, he-man, and Superman” class the individual under the type of the hero (p. 56). Villains are “idealized figures of evil, who tend to counter moral actions as a result of an inherently malicious will” (p. 58). Descriptions such as “bully, liar, Red, and traitor” place the individual as the villain type. The final type, fool, “are representations of average human nature but shrunken caricatures of it in the direction of defect and

weakness, falling ludicrously below the standards of intelligence, courage, and grace, set for ordinary group members” (p. 58) and descriptors such as “crackpot, fanatic, sissy, yes-man, and sucker” class the individual under fool (p. 56). The descriptions function as a means of control, which exert pressure, punishment or reward upon the individual. Using these types, individuals and groups “attempt to understand problematic behavior – whether because bizarre, amazing, incomprehensible, disturbing to routine of decorum, dangerous, or otherwise offensive to mores or propriety – by reducing them to simple concepts, familiar to all and indicated proper modes of response” (p. 57).

The types created are assigned by a collective process; a person may wish to act in a particular way, but only society can label him into one of the three types. Therefore, we must recognize that types, such as heroes, villains, and fools are constructed in an interactive process. According to Berger and Luckman (1966), actions and actors within the social world are typified, and types of actions are associated with types of actors, because of reoccurring social patterns. New events within the social world are institutionalized as they slowly lose their newness, becoming part of the “taken-for-granted ‘reality’” (p. 3). In other words, interaction is patterned and routines emerge, leading to a shared meaning (typification) about people, places, and events.

Typifications facilitate and coordinate activities, which makes behavior understandable and stable. According to Loseke (2003), in such a complex world that we live in, “social life depends on typifications – the images in our heads of *types* of things, experiences, and people” (Loseke 2003: 72). In order to successfully convince audiences of the veracity of a report about an event, or to successfully allow the audience to understand their reporting, the media must typify people, things and events in ways that

are recognizable within the culture and that correspond to “the images in our head[s]” (Loseke 2003: 54). Media typifications go beyond demographic descriptions (Loseke and Best 2003). Types include more elaborate terms such as “drug dealer,” “prostitute,” “athlete,” “single mother,” “abused child,” and “teacher,” to name a few. These typifications reduce large amounts of information about humans into recognizable categories that “encourage audience members to feel in particular ways toward these types of people” (Loseke and Best 2003: 110).

Loseke (2003), in her book *Thinking About Social Problems*, states that individuals involved in social problems are generally placed into one of two categories: victims and villains. Claims-makers, including media agents, encourage audiences to feel sympathy toward victims but not toward villains. Further, social problems claims frequently encourage the audience to feel hatred toward the villain of the social problem, such as the drug dealer, the pedophile, or the murderer. Of course, the media use other categories as well.

In a study of television news and news magazines *CBS Evening News*, *NBC Nightly News*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, Gans (1979) derived two different categories into which the media place people: Knowns (well-known people) and Unknowns (ordinary people). The people who appear most frequently in the news are the Knowns, and Gans (1979) further divided this category into five sub-categories – distinguishing them by the declining frequency with which certain people are talked about in the news: (1) incumbent President, (2) Presidential candidates, (3) leading federal officials, (4) state and local officials, and (5) alleged and actual violators of laws and mores (e.g., well-known people who become enmeshed in scandal). Within the second main category of

individuals in the news, the Unknowns, Gans (1979) created five sub-categories: (1) protestors, “rioters” and strikers; (2) victims; (3) alleged and actual violators of the laws and; (4) participants in unusual activities; and (5) voters, survey respondents, and other aggregates (statistical or “nonstatistical” sums of people in the news). Possibly, writing in the late 1970s, Gans (1979) typology understates the prominence of celebrities in the media today.

Chiasson (1997), Lull and Hinerman (1997), Thaler (1997), and Krajicek (1998) emphasize the celebrity focus of contemporary American society and its mass media. As Gabler (1998) writes:

No other society has ever had as many celebrities as ours or has revered them as intensely...[They are] the protagonists of our news, the subjects of our daily discourse and the repositories of our values, but they have also embedded themselves so deeply in our consciousness that many individuals profess feeling closer to, and more passionate about, them than their own primary relationships...[Celebrity] is the modern state of grace – the condition in the life movie to which nearly everyone aspires. Once we sat in movie theaters dreaming of stardom. Now we live in a movie dreaming of celebrity (pp. 7-8).

Because of this reverence of celebrities, events or scandals involving celebrities now get “crisis-like” attention comparable to that traditionally given disasters (Graber 1993).

Events such as the Clarence Thomas hearings, the attack on ice skater Nancy Kerrigan by fellow skater Tonya Harding, the criminal trials of William Kennedy Smith and O.J

Simpson, the alleged sexual molestation by Michael Jackson, and the incarceration of heiress Paris Hilton consume massive media attention. Although some of these may focus on otherwise “important” (problematic despite celebrity involvement) issues such as sexual assault, child molestation and murder, their special coverage is at least in part due to the appeal of celebrity (Graber 1993).

If individuals are to take what the media are reporting as important and use that information, they must believe that the media organization is credible. Therefore, I now turn to the mass media’s project of maintaining credibility.

Credibility and the Mass Media

Lubunski (1987) writes: “One of the most precious possessions of a newspaper...is its reputation” (p. 98). Credibility is a paramount goal of any media organization, and a serious loss of credibility can be damaging to the reputation of a media organization (Lubunski 1987). Credibility is the “the degree to which an individual perceives the media source portrays the real world truthfully” (Austin and Dong 1994: 973). In order for a media organization to maintain its credibility it must follow codes that specify and define conduct and limits (Iggers 1998). These codes make up the generally accepted signposts of adequate journalism. According to Hirst and Patching (2005), they include accountability, accuracy, balance and lack of bias, fairness, and objectivity. This thesis contends that consistency or coherence is another signpost of a media organization’s credibility (Chen and Meindl 1991).

Accountability in the media is “the process by which media organizations may be expected or obliged to render an account of their activities to their constituents” (Pritchard 2000: 2). A constituent is an individual, group, or organization that is important to the media organization, which may include its audience, advertisers, and regulatory agencies (Federal Communications Commission) (Pritchard 2000). In other words, the media must be trustworthy in the eyes of its constituents. For sociologists, trust is a prerequisite to any form of social interaction (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). Without some level of trust, collective behavior among contemporaries would not be feasible (Frank 1988; Orbell and Dawes 1991). The media “market” quality information (however ‘quality’ is defined), and are entrusted with providing it.

Accuracy is another standard that news media outlets pursue in order to maintain their credibility and image. “The principle of accuracy means that the news media have an obligation to ascertain the correctness of the facts they publish” (Iggers 1998: 43). In order for a news organization to be credible, headlines, news teases, and promotional material, photos, sound bites, and quotations should be accurate and should not misrepresent what occurred or is occurring (Iggers 1998). Errors in newspaper articles can cost the newspaper prestige and credibility (Williams and Martin 1911). Factual errors can include misstatements, omissions, under-emphasis, over-emphasis, misquotes, and misspellings. Headlines, names, ages, addresses, other locations, times and dates are all subject to misstatement (Tillinghast 1983).

In a study done in 1984 for the American Society of News Editors (ASNE), researchers evaluated people’s perceptions of newspaper credibility. Interviewing 1,600 adults over the telephone, the researchers found that perceived accuracy was one of the

best predictors of the perception of newspaper credibility (Graziano and McGrath 1986). In 1999, the ASNE commissioned a follow-up study, this time interviewing 3,000 subjects over the phone. Urban (1999) found that small errors in newspapers undermined public confidence in the media; the number one predictor of credibility was perceived number of errors. Taken together, the study findings suggest that accuracy is only becoming more important to the appearance of credibility over time. Haiman (2000) concurs that spelling and grammar errors, wrong names, wrong titles, wrong addresses, wrong dates, and other mistakes all affect how the public sees the press's credibility. Each error "erodes public confidence in newspaper's ability to get it right" (Haiman 2000: 8).

Media organizations also supposedly hold a standard of fairness – they strive to balance 'sides' – in reporting the news (Fico and Drager 2001). They are expected to disclose all available information to the audience and to provide a representation of all points of view (Hurst and White 1994; Iggers 1998). Fairness and balance in news reporting are central to a democratic society (Fico and Drager 2001). A democratic society must be able make full, informed choices from an array of policy priorities and positions (Fico and Drager 2001). Within a media organization, concern for fairness and balance in coverage of the news stems from the belief that lapses may "lead the public to perceive bias and thereby harm credibility" (Fico and Drager 2001: 3).

Objectivity is another code – one related to fairness – that news media outlets use in order to maintain their credibility and image. The task of journalism is supposedly to discover events that occur and report them, and to avoid seeming too strongly opinionated (Hirst and Patching 2005). According to Gans (1979), even though

individual journalists write most newspaper articles, they work under the direction of an editor, hence their stories are shaped to the editor's opinion. On major political or economic issues, the top editor determines the stand that a journalist will take in an article. Notwithstanding that influence, individual writers convey their opinions through sometimes subtle decisions about wording and tone, as Gans (1979) explains: "when journalists describe participants in civil disturbances as 'mobs' or 'hordes,' when they do daily report a rise in the cost of living, or when they describe adolescent behavior in sardonic tones, they are offering opinions, but they are unaware that they are doing so" (p. 199). It is only when these ways of writing become controversial that they appear – to journalists, their sponsors, and their audiences – as opinion-based. Thompson (1999) observes that media organizations make decisions about who will give comments, who will be avoided for comment, and what will be included from sources' statements: all these decisions shape the facts. Clearly, the appearance of objectivity, and not objectivity *per se*, is at stake.

Consistency or coherence is another code that news media outlets use in order to maintain their credibility and image, though the literature on media emphasizes it less than the other codes. Coherence *is*, however, stressed in studies of narrative across several academic disciplines. Within sociology, Linde (1993) emphasizes coherence as an essential feature of narrative. Narrative is a discursive form that makes some point; the parts of narrative are linked – they cohere – for the sake of making that point. Individuals generally demand coherence of their running life story in order to understand their lives and make sense of their experiences (Linde 1993). Individuals become especially aware of their pursuit of coherence in changing or novel situations: we can

become aware of this personal demand for coherence in situations where some new event has happened that does not seem to fit with or follow from past events. We can experience a great deal of confusion and uneasiness until we somehow make the new event fit the ongoing story, or until the story has been changed to accommodate the new event (Linde 1993: 17).

In addition to being a personal demand – arguably a sort of cognitive necessity – coherence is also a social demand. Coherence “is in fact a social obligation that must be fulfilled in order for the participants [within society] to appear as competent members of the culture” (Linde 1993: 16). Since we live in a mediated society – that is, we rely on the media for concepts, images, and vocabulary for guidance in living our lives – the mass media are held to producing and providing coherent and consistent information. Without the mass media producing coherent information, confusion and uneasiness would arise on a mass scale. Therefore, journalists and media organization try to maintain a coherent line concerning opinions on particular people and events in society. Gans (1979) notes that, though journalists may abandon or change the stands they have previously taken, they hesitate to do so, “fearing they will then be charged with inconsistency, which undermines their credibility” (Gans 1979: 199-200). If a change of stand is made, the change must make sense – or more to the point, the media must make sense of it for the audience.

Chen and Meindl (1991) agree with Gans’ assessment, stating that “consistency is another means by which news organizations maintain credibility” (p. 526). Focusing on the popular press as an influential agent in the construction of corporate leadership images, Chen and Meindl (1991) asked, “Given the initial success of a firm, what image

of the CEO will be constructed? And how will the image be reconstructed with new, negative performance information that is also associated with the tenure of the same leader?" (p. 523). The authors focused on Donald Burr, the ex-CEO of People Express Airlines. According to Chen and Meindl (1991), People Express Airlines experienced three phases of operation: (1) from 1981-1983 the company had great success, (2) from 1984-1985 the company witnessed expansion, loss, and gains (mixed performance), and (3) from 1986 onward the company experienced failure and bankruptcy. Chen and Meindl (1991) conducted their analyses in terms of these three phases.

Chen and Meindl (1991) conducted two analyses on magazine and newspaper articles about Burr. Twenty-two articles representing five journals and two newspapers – *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Business Week*, *Fortune*, *Inc.*, *Newsweek* and *Time* – were used. The first analysis identified leader-characteristic themes, and the frequency and trends of those themes. The second analysis focused on metaphors about Burr. In the first analysis, 72 readers, divided into three groups, were asked to read the 22 articles about Burr. The readers were asked to write descriptions of Burr as both a person and as a CEO. These “image descriptions” were grouped into themes, six of which were used frequently (Ability, People Orientation, Innovation/Vision, Motivation, Overdone, and Ill-Adaptation).

Chen and Meindl (1991) found that the positive references were used overwhelmingly in regard to Burr in all three periods. The results of the analysis of the reader’s leader descriptions showed that the image of Burr over time was consistent; the past was modified to accommodate new and changing information about the plight of People Express. Specifically, pertaining to the failure period (period 3), “the overall

image of the leader was of an admirable leader with otherwise basically good qualities that unfortunately ill-fitted a changed environment. The message conveyed through the image was that the cause of the failure by and large lay not in the inherent quality of the leader but in the changed situation” (p. 536). These findings, according to Chen and Meindl (1991), suggest that there was an extensive effort by the press to account for performance failure without rejecting Burr’s positive leader attributions.

That finding was reinforced by findings from the second analysis. In this analysis, Chen and Meindl (1991) analyzed the metaphors used in the same news stories that the subjects had based their own descriptions of Donald Burr. The authors screened sentence by sentence for “words, phrases, or clauses that metaphorically described Burr’s personality, his behavior, or his impact” (p. 539). Altogether, 46 metaphorical expressions were identified. The 46 metaphorical expressions were grouped according to the performance phase in which they were printed. Concerning each phase, these metaphorical expressions were further classified into metaphorical themes.

According to Chen and Meindl (1991), in the first phase, “Burr was compared to a preacher, a parent, a builder, a wizard, Mr. Peanut, and a competitor” (p. 540). Half of the metaphorical expressions in this phase pertained to the preacher theme. For example, a preacher expression was: “The glue is Burr himself, who dashes about preaching his horizontal-management style with messianic zeal” (p. 540). The preacher theme coupled with the less salient parent theme, stressed that Burr had in fact created not a company but rather a family. Therefore, Chen and Meindl (1991) considered “leader-as-preacher as the theme that unified various metaphorical expressions” in phase 1 (p. 541).

In the second performance phase, Burr tended to be described as a “preacher, a father, a maverick, an entrepreneur, a Spartan, a visionary, a whiz, and a competitor” (Chen and Meindl 1991: 541). In view of the successful survival of crisis during this phase, Chen and Meindl (1991) expected the elaboration of messianic features. The preacher theme persisted into period 3, as evidenced by the following metaphor: “People Express sometimes seemed more cult than company. Donald Burr, chairman and co-founder, was spiritual leader. The thousands of travelers who crowded its planes at unthinkable low fares were its flock” (Chen and Meindl 1991: 541). In addition to the preacher theme, the fighter theme also emerged. The fighter theme stressed “will and heroism in the face of adverse decisions” (Chen and Meindl 1991: 541). In the end People Express failed. However, Burr’s image persisted as he was portrayed as the heroic fighter who suffered a tragic failure.

Chen and Meindl (1991) suggest that their analysis may be used to make tentative statements about the business press. Specifically, they state:

In the effort to meet the demands of consuming publics, the reporting of hard, factual news is enhanced via soft constructions of various organizational processes and attributes, including images of organizational leaders. The production of these images [commits the organization to that image] and thus exposes press organizations to risks that could damage their credibility.... Credibility is generated out of a consistency with past constructions and the ability of those constructions to accommodate current realities (p. 543).

In summary, the new image of Burr was made continuous with the past, allowing at the same time an account for the changed fate of the organization. The commitment to images by the media may be difficult to discard. The media has commitments to themselves and to other organizational constituents that may cause them to be resistant to change. One of these commitments is to the maintenance of credibility.

As previously discussed, if a media outlet's credibility is undermined, it would likely cease to exist. News organizations depend economically on an audience attracted by claims of credibility (Fico and Drager 2001). Financially speaking, if a newspaper were unable to maintain credibility, then revenues, mainly from advertising, could be hurt (Fuller 1996), for, according to Book (1996), "perhaps the outstanding advantage of newspaper advertising is its credibility" (p. 111). Most advertising is found within television, radio, and magazines, but "people tend to believe what they read in newspapers because the medium is mainly a vehicle for objectively reported news" (p. 111). According to Meyer (2004), advertisers will invest in newspapers that offer reliable and high-quality information to the public; a prerequisite to financial success for a newspaper is quality journalism. "Cutbacks in content quality will erode public trust, weaken societal influence, and eventually lead to losses in circulation and advertising dollars" (p. 74).

A news outlet's credibility is also captive to the threat of potential lawsuits. Newspapers and broadcast media often comment or write extensively about sensitive policy and legal matters and must be careful about word and fact selection. In other words, the media – newspapers, magazines, radio, and television – must exercise good judgment when gathering and printing information. In other words, the media must not

disseminate libelous information. Libel is “a statement of fact that is false and defamatory of and concerning [an individual]; that is published to a third party (in written or otherwise tangible form); causes actual injury (unless obviated by the presence of presumed harm); that is the result of fault by the [other party]; that causes special harm in addition to generalized reputational history” (Gassner 2006:49). If the newspaper does produce such false or defamatory statements then libel lawsuits may arise against the media organization. These lawsuits can be costly for newspapers, whether they win or lose (Lubunski 1978). Therefore, newspapers are cautious about what and how they present information.

To summarize, research has shown that for mass media outlets to maintain their credibility they must follow particular codes of journalism. Coherence and consistency in news reporting is one such code. This thesis submits that in order for *The Chicago Tribune* to maintain credibility as a coherent source, it helped celebrated athlete Kobe Bryant with de facto impression management (Goffman 1959) after charges of sexual assault emerged.

Impression Management

During the past five decades, a perspective emphasizing the degree to which social behavior resembles acting has grown popular in the social sciences. More specifically, there is a concern for how social actors make positive impressions for themselves through social interactions. This impression management or self-presentation framework employs the notion that people attempt to maintain their appearance in front of others by “successfully staging a character” (Goffman 1959: 208).

The roots of the impression management idea can be traced to symbolic interactionists such as Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934). Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) argued that self-presentation involves imagining oneself in other people's shoes, anticipating others' reaction to aspects of social interaction, and conducting oneself with these anticipated reactions in mind. Goffman expanded on these insights. In his work *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* he first identified the concept of impression management. Goffman (1959) argues that it is the very essence of social life that whenever "an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to other which is in his interest to convey" (p. 4). In other words, he contends that every action performed by an actor is designed to show that person in a favorable manner, what is favorable being socially up for grabs.

Goffman (1959) suggests that impression management is fundamental in society. Self-presentations serve to communicate each person's identity, plans, and roles in society. In other words, impression management activities pattern interaction, allowing it to run in predictable fashion. Of course, social interactions inevitably contain obstacles, impediments, and threats that may deconstruct desired identities (Schlenker and Weigold 1992). When these situations arise, people find it beneficial to make subsequent corrections (Schlenker and Weigold 1992; Cupach and Metts 1994).

Goffman's (1959) original conception of impression management is directed toward face-to-face interaction. This thesis will extend this original concept, suggesting that impression management can also be accomplished outside of face-to-face interaction and unintentionally, by individuals or larger institutions such as the media. This thesis

thus considers the media as an institution that aids in what I refer to as de facto impression management.

'De Facto' Impression Management

Individual actors, such as image consultants and even college professors, can provide – either intentionally or unintentionally – image restoration to other individuals. Institutions, such as voluntary or involuntary treatment groups, can also provide image restoration to other individuals through subjective reasoning.

Celebrities acquire public recognition through the help of agents, publicists, promoters, and photographers that create, maintain, and endorse the particular impression that the celebrity wishes to uphold (Rojek 2002). This goes for politicians as well. According to Louw (2005), a significant amount of time and energy of politicians is focused on impression management tactics that groom the politicians to perform a political role. Consultants are hired who specialize in inventing, scripting, and projecting a particular image of the politician.

In another example of third-party impression management, Presser (2004), in the process of obtaining life stories of violent male offenders, discovered that each interview “was a setting for construction and reconstruction of the self” (p. 83, emphasis in original). The men “used and created opportunities *in the interview* to resist their problematic classification and to make claims about the social problems *they* encountered, such as with the criminal justice system” (p. 83, emphasis in original). In other words, the men’s accounts implicated the study itself.

Presser (2004) found that the research participants attempted to exploit “opportunities in the interview to construct the reality of a desired moral character” (p. 93). First, the interview itself said something about the moral persona of the participant; in some cases, for example, just agreeing to be interviewed indicated less-than-offender status of the participant. Presser (2004) reported that the majority of her 27 informants enacted a moral self in the interview; the interview allowed the men to resist being classified as bad.

Institutions can also provide individuals with impression management tools. Programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, battered women’s shelters, and offender treatment programs actively instruct people in tactics for improving their public selves. Recovering alcoholics and addicts in treatment programs utilize institutionally sanctioned tools to facilitate the construction of non-alcoholic and non-addict identities. The recovering individual commonly “infuses their stories, accounts, and demonstrations of self-change with locally informed understandings on the nature of addiction, relapse, and recovery” (Burns and Peyrot 2003: 417).

Discussing such self-construction in Alcoholic Anonymous, Pollner and Stein (2001) note that “self-processing agents and agencies stipulate the substance and dynamics of subjectivity and provide programs through which the imputed qualities of self are formed and reformed” (p. 46). According to Pollner and Stein (2001), Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) “facilitate(s) ‘transformation’ or ‘growth’ toward an ideal self” (Pollner and Stein 2001 47). The ideal self is achieved by abstaining from alcohol, following the Twelve Steps and saying that one is doing so, attending and speaking at meetings.

In an analysis of audiotapes from AA meetings, Pollner and Stein (2001) examined the use of self-deprecating humor as a contribution to self-doubling – the metamorphosis of the “alcoholic self” and the continuously re-created “recovering self” (p. 47). AA provides an acceptable setting where its members can use humor to articulate the shaping of doubled selves, allowing the members to create a new identity. This humor, most used in the early stages of recovery from alcoholism, is the first step with which AA members become aware of identifying themselves as an alcoholic.

As individual AA members describe their own sources of self-deprecating humor (e.g., misbehavior and defects of character and thought), the AA audience, in turn, is doubled over in laughter (Pollner and Stein 2003). This collective laughter allows the AA speaker to understand and appreciate the new self that he or she is creating. Each laugh “constitutes, articulates, reflects, broadcasts, and reaffirms the profane and sacred selves putatively lodged within. As members give and get the jokes, they laugh themselves into being” (Pollner and Stein 2003: 62).

Another voluntary organization may also provide its members an opportunity to maintain an impression about themselves, even if the impression rendered is regarded as taboo, immoral, and illegal. Many cultures, including the United States, consistently hold that adults should not engage in sexual relations with young children (deYoung 1989). In a review of the 1982 through 1985 newsletters, booklets, and brochures published by the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA), deYoung (1989) deconstructs accounts the organization makes available for that very practice.

According to deYoung (1989), NAMBLA mainly uses justifications to rationalize its philosophy and its members’ practices. For example, NAMBLA asserts that adult-

child sex “is [not] in any way injurious to the children” (deYoung 1989: 116). This stands in direct opposition to the strong consensus that adult-child sex is harmful to the children; words like “abuse,” “victimization,” “exploitation,” and “trauma” are frequently used by professionals in the field of child abuse to attest to the detrimental effects of adult-child sexual behavior (p. 116). NAMBLA and its members stress that engaging in such behavior is a positive experience for the children. The organization’s publications, therefore, “are filled with anecdotal accounts, letters, poetry and articles that proclaim the benefits and advantages to children of having a sexual relationship with an adult male” (deYoung 1989: 116).

Some NAMBLA publications also insist that adult-child sex liberates “children from what it characterizes as the repressive bonds of society; the sexual liberation of children, then, is presented as a necessary step for achieving that larger goal” (deYoung 1989: 120). This alleged higher loyalty to the liberation of children is what Hewitt and Hall (1973) refer to as a quasi-theory, an “ad hoc explanation brought to problematic situations in order to give them order and hope” (p. 367). As deYoung (1989) explains, treating children to ensure protection and proper development is within commonsense and common interest of the larger society. Noteworthy is the fact that NAMBLA maintains a consistent line, that the organization is concerned about the well-being of children.

In another example of how an institution can assist people in managing a particular impression, Ferraro and Johnson (1983) and Loseke (1989, 2001) describe discursive self-transformation among women in battered women’s shelters. In the collaboration with the shelter workers and other clients, the battered women

progressively come to define themselves as survivors, for example, and no longer as “battered women.” Similarly, Fox (2001) finds that a treatment program for violent offenders in prison rather forcefully influenced the inmates to “re-orient their ‘thinking’ about or perceptions of their own lives and selves” (p. 435).

Fox (1999) is critical of claims of real cognitive change made by offender treatment programs. After observing the Cognitive Self-Change (CSC) program in several Vermont correctional facilities, Fox (1999) notes that the program has “pre-packaged reality for inmates to recontextualize their criminal histories” (p. 436). The “erroneous thoughts” and “anger” of the inmates is typified, as these inmates violent identities are decontextualized to fit a particular type. Thus, the treatment program has created types of people: “inmates are immoral, irrational, irresponsible, or ill” (p. 450). By creating these criminal types, CSC’s practices allows for the “ideological representation of criminals that, in turn, sustain and reproduce the program’s logic” (p. 435). The very nature of the program builds and fortifies this typification. As the inmates are “talked into being” particular types of people, their “techniques of neutralizations” (accounts of their bad behavior) are interpreted by the facilitators, sustaining the criminal classification of the inmate. His self is created through “discursive construction of criminal selves according to institutional conditions and demands” (Fox 1999: 435). Thus, Fox exposes the treatment program as providing oppressive or static accounts of offender behavior and forced personas. Arguably, however, these are personas more socially acceptable to mainstream society than ‘unreformed criminals’ would be.

In short, third parties including institutions, can assist individuals with impression management. Of importance to this thesis is how an institution – the media – assists the impression management for others after transgression. The media, such televisions, radios, newspapers, films, books, and the Internet have become salient fixtures in Western, modern life. With such tools, namely the Internet, people are communicating anonymously with other individuals through discursive tactics. In other words, the face-to-face interaction that occurred prior these advancements has decreased. Therefore, it is likely that discursive tactics have become increasingly common as impression management aids. It would be inappropriate to assume that the media, the transmitter of immeasurable amounts of information, are immune from employing or transmitting impression management techniques to individuals. I argue that *The Chicago Tribune*, as the third party, provided impression management for Kobe Bryant’s sexual assault allegations, helping align Bryant’s previous persona with new, potentially discrepant information.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

This study examines the case of alleged sexual misconduct by Kobe Bryant. Specifically, I analyze news reports in *The Chicago Tribune* published from June 30, 2003 (the date of the alleged sexual assault) through August 31, 2004 (the day before the charges were dropped). I focus on this time period to evaluate what *The Chicago Tribune* “made of” Bryant’s image while he was still charged for the alleged sexual assault – that is, while his reputation, and hence the character that newspaper had previously presented, were still problematic.

Though several types of news media exist (e.g., television, radio, magazines) and are viable for understanding the management of incoherence in presentation of who a person is, this study focuses on newspaper accounts. For the present study, I will analyze news articles from *The Chicago Tribune*. *The Chicago Tribune*, a major Illinois news source, is also one of the top ten newspapers in the United States (Lazich 2007). *The Chicago Tribune* has a daily readership of 1.7 million and 2.7 million on Sunday (*The Chicago Tribune* 2007), circulating more than 580,000 newspapers a day (Lazich 2007). *The Chicago Tribune* also:

Covers international and national news with 20 bureaus, including offices in Moscow, London, Jerusalem, Beijing, Mexico City, Johannesburg, Washington DC, New York and Los Angeles. Noted for extensive coverage of business news, the Tribune provides in-depth profiles of the more than 85 Fortune 500 companies headquartered in the Chicago region, along with superb biographical sketches, criticism and comment of research-worthy topics, coverage of social issues, urban

affairs, sports, politics and government, cultural affairs, and the important issues and events (NewsBank, Inc. 2007).

I opted to use *The Chicago Tribune* for this project for two additional reasons. First, *The Tribune* publishes a great many articles on sports as Chicago has numerous professional sports teams. Second, *The Tribune* can be considered as neutral with respect to Bryant's persona as it is not located near Los Angeles, California, Edwards, Colorado, or Ardore, Pennsylvania – places with allegiance to either Bryant or his accuser. Media outlets in these cities and towns might be prejudicial in regard to Bryant's characterization.

I chose to examine news articles instead of articles from magazines or television programs because newspapers are commonly considered more accurate and legitimate (Ericson et al. 1987). Moreover, newspapers are readily available, have broad public use, and are an unchangeable form of the media in the sense that they can be read and re-read. (Adelman and Verbrugge 2000).

Case Selection

The news articles from *The Chicago Tribune* were drawn from NewsBank, Inc. I was able to access NewsBank, Inc. through the Knoxville Public Library online reference database. NewsBank, Inc. is a web-based information provider that allows access to current and archived content from more than 2,000 newspaper titles and millions of newspaper articles (NewsBank, Inc. 2007).

Using NewsBank, Inc., I searched in the archive newspaper articles on *The Chicago Tribune* from June 30, 2003 (the date of the alleged sexual assault) to August 31, 2004 (the day before the charges were dropped). I used the key word “Kobe Bryant” in order to locate all articles that discussed Kobe Bryant, his persona, and the sexual assault case at hand. In a preliminary search of NewsBank, Inc., I found 564 articles.

I read through the 564 articles and derived some themes concerning how the alleged trespass of Bryant was “storied.” I eliminated (1) duplicates, (2) stories with fewer than 100 words, (3) false reads, and (4) caption for graphics. Duplicate articles were eliminated to ensure that coding was not conducted on the same article twice or more. Out of the 564 articles, 15 articles (2.7 percent) were eliminated from analysis because they were duplicates. Stories with 100 words or less were also eliminated due to the inability to adequately ascertain a theme from such a small amount of information. From an original 564 articles, 42 articles (7.4 percent) were eliminated from analysis because they had 100 words or less.

The third set of articles eliminated consisted of was false reads. False reads are articles obtained through the search criteria through NewsBank, Inc. that were neither about the sexual assault case at hand nor about Bryant’s persona. False reads may include Kobe Bryant’s name, but do not describe, explain, or contain information that is pertinent to Kobe Bryant’s persona or to the sexual assault case. For example, an article was eliminated if it stated that “Kobe Bryant scored 10 points in last night’s game against the Chicago Bulls.” Out of the 564 articles, 232 articles (41.1 percent) were eliminated because they were false reads. Captions for graphics may also be included within the NewsBank, Inc. database, but do not describe the case at hand; captions for graphics are

short sentences or paragraphs that describe a picture inserted in the text of the newspaper, but do not explain or give pertinent information surrounding the case. Out of the 564 articles, 1 article (.18 percent) was eliminated because it was a caption for a photo. Editorials or opinion articles were not removed from the analysis. These articles are a “forum for public officials, academics, experts, advocates and other forums of public intellectuals to articulate diverse opinions on salient issues” (Day and Golan 2005: 61). My purpose was to understand how *The Chicago Tribune* attempted to adjust its presentation of Bryant; deliberate inclusion of editorial or opinion articles into the newspaper may be another way in which *The Chicago Tribune* salvaged Bryant’s persona.⁵ These parameters yielded 274 articles for analysis (see Appendix A).

Data Analysis

Content analysis is “a set of methods for analyzing the symbolic content of any communication” (Singleton and Straits 2005: 371). It reduces the total content of a form of communication (e.g., newspaper articles) to a set of categories that represent some characteristic of the research at hand. According to Singleton and Straits (2005), the researcher does not casually look at the form of communication, but (1) identifies categories, (2) defines the categories according to objective criteria, (3) systematically selects and codes the form of communication, and (4) reports the frequency of the categories into which the form of communication has been coded. The authors state that

⁵ Day and Golan (2005) conducted a content analysis of opinion editorials in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. The study revealed that topics were limited to such broad policy issues as gay marriage, affirmative action, and the death penalty. I have therefore, decided to include editorial and opinion articles in this analysis in order to see if a particular viewpoint is used in conjunction with other “factual” articles in *The Chicago Tribune*.

the most common application of content analysis is to the available printed or spoken word. Hence, content analysis is an appropriate method for studying newspaper articles.

As a research method, content analysis has certain benefits. First, it is an unobtrusive technique (Krippendorff 2004). Content analysis of some forms of communication, such as newspaper articles, does not require the researcher to intrude upon the research context. Second, content analysis can deal with large amounts of data (Krippendorff 1980). The data for case studies can quickly mount. Content analysis can allow for the processing of this large amount a data over long periods of time (Krippendorff 1980). This leads to a third advantage: the data probed by content analysis are permanent (Holsti 1969). The same words will appear in the same articles each time they are read, which invites replication of the study (Holsti 1969).

I used QDA-Miner, a computer-based text analysis package, for the analysis. QDA-Miner can manage complex projects involving large numbers of documents. With this software, I coded text data – marking it as theoretically meaningful – and subsequently identified patterns in and relationships between codes (Provalis Research 2005). In the body of literature published on computer-based qualitative analysis there is agreement about the advantages of using computers in dealing with the tedious clerical tasks involved with qualitative research (Dey 1993; Muhr 1991; Richards and Richards 1994; Tesch 1990). The software helps to free the “analysis from the tentacles of clerical tasks that have hitherto too often tied it down” (Richards and Richards 1991: 52). Computer applications assist with the various tasks of qualitative analysis.

The news reports were copied from NewsBank, Inc. into a Microsoft Word document. All documents were saved to a folder that was easily transported into QDA-

Miner. The documents were examined for exploration of story themes and storytelling strategies in *The Chicago Tribune* that helped to maintain Bryant's erstwhile persona.

Coding for Themes

The first step of the analysis was to discover all wording that had to do with 'who Kobe Bryant is,' in those articles published in *The Chicago Tribune* (hereon I will refer to the newspaper as the *Tribune*). Initially, I briefly read through the articles in order to gain a general conception of the articles in their entirety. The themes identified using QDA-Miner were referred to as *codes*. In the full analysis of the 274 news articles found in the *Tribune* five underlying themes emerged that appeared to assist in managing Bryant's persona. I call these themes, or devices: (1) case is not paramount, (2) case is hindering basketball, (3) external lures are to blame, (4) silver lining in allegations, and (5) "court-to-the-court." These devices are discussed further below.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

We interrupt this sexual assault case and perhaps a lifetime in prison for another basketball game (Smith 2004f: 1).

The sexual assault case that emerged in Colorado in June 2003 received a good deal of media coverage. What made this case particularly compelling was the individual against whom the allegations were alleged – Kobe Bryant, a man whom the media had portrayed as virtuous, family oriented, and athletically gifted. Certainly, the allegations could have tarnished Bryant’s image. Besides, the allegations could have tarnished the credibility of *The Chicago Tribune*, a media outlet that helped to foster the image of Bryant as a virtuous individual. But the allegations had neither of these damaging effects. This is so because *The Chicago Tribune* stressed past, positive attributes about Kobe Bryant and deflected attention away from any negative attributes suggested by sexual assault allegations. *The Chicago Tribune* committed to Bryant’s positive attributes and deflected attention in order to maintain credibility as a consistent news source; credibility was generated out of consistency through the ability to reconcile past construction of Bryant with the current reality of the sexual assault allegations.

The newspaper was not silent on the fact that the reputation of Kobe Bryant had suffered due to the allegations. The newspaper touched on the subject of his faltering image and the damage the allegations had on his reputation. For example, on July 19, 2003, *The Chicago Tribune* stated that “regardless of the outcome, the charge will undoubtedly tarnish Bryant's reputation. A player of enormous athletic skills, which have earned him comparisons to Michael Jordan, he is also known for being one of the NBA's

good guys, unusually polite and well-spoken, with a reputation as a devoted family man” (*The Chicago Tribune*: 1). Prior to the allegations “he was becoming the face of the NBA, the bearer of that mythical torch passed from Julius Erving and Magic Johnson to [Michael] Jordan” (Smith 2004g: 2). “He had the game, the flair, the championships so quickly, the glamour” (Smith 2004d: 2), but now his “image is pulverized” (Jackson 2003: 19).

Even so, *The Chicago Tribune* continued to present him as one of the best athletes in the NBA. Bryant was called a “prodigy” (Smith 2003c: 1) whose “genius is basketball” (*The Chicago Tribune*, September 13, 2003: 3). Relegating the sexual assault allegations to the background, the newspaper stressed that Bryant was “one of the most talented and dynamic basketball players of his generation” (*The Chicago Tribune*, July 19, 2003: 1). Kobe Bryant, “the closest thing that we have seen to Jordan” (Smith 2003n: 2) is “one of the two or three brightest stars in one of the most popular professional sports leagues” in American society today (Wycliff 2003: 27).

Generally speaking, *The Chicago Tribune* attenuated the sexual assault allegations and emphasized positive aspects about Bryant. The persistent emphasis on the positive and de-emphasis on the negative allowed the newspaper to reconcile the past positive construction of Bryant with the current negative aspects of the sexual assault allegations. The newspaper accomplished this reconciliation of depictions through five devices that I call: (1) case is not paramount, (2) case is hindering basketball, (3) external lures are to blame, (4) silver lining in the allegations, and (5) “court-to-the-court.”

In the first device – *case is not paramount* – *The Chicago Tribune* provided very few factual articles about Kobe Bryant and the sexual assault case. Instead, the

newspaper dedicated the bulk of the stories to basketball, such as the number of points Bryant scored in the previous game, Bryant's free agency, and Bryant's injury updates.

The second device was *case is hindering basketball*. *The Chicago Tribune* devoted much time to connecting court appearance to preseason camp, exhibition games, regular season games, and the NBA season. By contrasting the court appearances with basketball games, *The Chicago Tribune* blurred the line between which appearance was more important. The newspaper hinted that the trial was getting in the way of Bryant playing basketball. Further, the newspaper introduced a part of Bryant's life that was previously positive, and downplayed the negative aspect of Bryant's life – the sexual assault allegations. The newspaper's third device was *external lures are to blame*. Here, *The Chicago Tribune* acknowledged that Bryant had an affair, and further more blamed outside agents (e.g., the media, the NBA, and society) for expecting and even allowing Bryant's adulterous behavior.

In the fourth device – *silver lining in the allegations* – the newspaper frequently noted basketball games (or NBA season) Bryant could miss due to upcoming court appearances; thereby, the newspaper gave equal importance to both the sexual assault allegations and to the basketball games. The final device was the “*court-to-the-court*.” *The Chicago Tribune* emphasized Bryant's determination in attending both court appearances and basketball games on the same day. By doing so, the newspaper placed equal or more emphasis upon Bryant as a professional athlete than as a criminal defendant.

Together, the five devices allowed *The Chicago Tribune* to reconcile past, positive information with current, negative information. This effectively limited damage to Bryant's overall persona.

FINDINGS

Case Is Not Paramount

In the first device – where the case was presented as not paramount – *The Chicago Tribune* simply provided very few factual articles about Kobe Bryant and the sexual assault case. Instead, the newspaper relegated the bulk of the stories to NBA basketball season and the battle over Bryant's free agency with the Lakers.

In the original search of news articles published in *The Chicago Tribune*, 564 articles surfaced. Out of these 564 articles, only 82 articles (14.5 percent) were devoted to factual matters surrounding the sexual assault allegations.⁶ In the sample of 82 articles, 9 articles partially discussed the factual matters surrounding the case. In other words, the articles were sectioned off to discuss other news of the day (see Appendix B for an example). As such, only 73 articles (12.9 percent) between June 30, 2003 and August 31, 2004 in *The Chicago Tribune* were exclusively devoted to discussing the factual proceedings behind the assault trial.

The rather low number (82 articles out of 564 articles) of factual articles is noteworthy, since the allegations were the basis for the scandal. Legal decisions, court

⁶ "Factual" articles were articles that discussed the sexual assault case. The articles discussed, for example: Kobe Bryant's arrest, the felony charge, hospital visits, court decisions, defense or prosecution strategies for trial, preliminary hearings, and appeals, motions, decisions, and judgments made by the court.

appearances, motions, and appeals would have an impact upon all the parties involved (e.g., Kobe Bryant and the accuser) and therefore, would seem important. It was surprising to find that exclusively few articles, between June 30, 2003 and August 31, 2004, would pertain to the sexual assault case at hand. Only 12.9 percent of the articles found were devoted to such issues.

I considered the section of the newspaper in which the articles appeared. Case-specific articles should not be expected to appear as frequently, if at all, in the sports section, but they should appear in the news section. In fact, 80 of the 82 factual articles (97.6 percent) were located in the “sports” section, while only 2 of the 82 articles (2.4 percent) were located in the “news” section. “Sport” is still synonymous with the words play and fun, and the placement of rape within the sport section may be seen as minimizing the importance of such an issue.

I wanted to know more about the articles that I considered false reads and therefore did not include in the 274 articles that concerned either Bryant as a person or his criminal case. The reason for examining the excluded articles is to show that a vast majority of articles provided about Kobe Bryant from June 30, 2003 and August 31, 2004 had no bearing on the sexual assault case. The excluded 290 articles (51.4 percent) discussed other matters, which were not pertinent to understanding the sexual assault case or Bryant’s persona. Yet, they point to one interesting fact: together, these articles outnumbered factual articles about the sexual assault case by almost a factor of three.

Out of the original 564 articles, 135 articles (24 percent) were what I call filler articles; these articles surfaced in the original keyword search because the name “Kobe Bryant” was found within the article, but discussed trivial matter or information that was

irrelevant to this project. For example, in an article dated September 7, 2003, Kobe Bryant's name was mentioned in reference to a cousin of his who had information about a past murder case. This mention of Kobe Bryant in the news article is not in reference to the sexual assault case or to his overall persona (see Appendix C).

The remaining 97 excluded articles were devoted to issues relating to Bryant and basketball; 68 articles discussed the number of points Bryant scored in a game; 16 articles discussed Bryant's free agency options, and 13 articles discussed Bryant's injury updates. In fact, 135 articles out of 564 (58.2 percent) were of no relevance to understanding the case, and 97 articles out of 564 (17.2 percent) were devoted to issues of basketball, such as how many points Bryant scored during the previous game. Therefore, at a time when the sexual assault case was increasingly important, filler articles and articles about basketball filled the pages of *The Chicago Tribune*.

The excluded articles overpowered the reader with useless and trivial information, which softened the information stemming from the impending sexual assault trial. Further, by frequently referring to Bryant and basketball, *The Chicago Tribune* provided information that was consistent with Bryant's positive, pre-allegation image. The newspaper presented its audience with an image of Bryant that was familiar and positive, and not negative. In other words, the newspaper reconciled the current, negative aspects of the sexual assault case with the past, positive image it had established of Bryant.

Case Is Hindering Basketball

During the analysis of the 274 articles, I noticed that *The Chicago Tribune* devoted much attention to connecting court appearances to basketball. First, following

the formal charges of sexual assault, the newspaper would frequently note whether Bryant would miss or attend preseason camp, exhibition games, and regular season games due to preliminary court appearances. Second, during this time, the newspaper also estimated what regular season games Bryant would miss, as well as where the trial would fit into the scheme of the NBA regular season. Finally, the newspaper also emphasized Bryant's inability to attend the 2004 Olympics because of the sexual assault case. When the U.S. Men's Basketball Team failed to win the gold medal, news writers stated that the team would have won with "the players who elected not to go to Athens, like Kevin Garnett, Tracy McGrady, Jason Kidd, Kobe Bryant and Vince Carter" (Smith 2004b: 2).

By contrasting the court appearances with basketball games, *The Chicago Tribune* blurred the line between which appearance was more important. Emphasizing that Bryant would miss preseason camp and exhibition games, regular season games, (possibly) NBA season, and the 2004 Olympics, the newspaper hinted to the fact that the trial was getting in the way of basketball; Bryant's playing time in the NBA is more important than his trial. In addition, by introducing aspects of Bryant's life that were positive, it downplayed negative aspects of Bryant's life that arose with the sexual assault allegations.

The articles found in *The Chicago Tribune*, news writers frequently discussed where Bryant would be in relation to upcoming court appearances. Initially, the news writers talked about where Bryant would be in relation to his first preliminary hearing (October 9, 2003) versus preseason camp and exhibition games with the Lakers. In an article that discussed the scheduling of the October 9, 2003 court date, the authors also

made note of the juxtaposition between the preliminary hearing and basketball with the Lakers:

Bryant spoke only once, when he replied, 'No, sir,' to Judge Frederick Gannett's question of whether he objected to the Oct. 9 date, thereby waiving his right to a preliminary hearing within 30 days. Oct. 9 is a Thursday, the day the Lakers are tentatively scheduled to return to Los Angeles after exhibition games the previous two nights at the University of Hawaii. Sources close to Bryant said he has told them he intends to attend training camp in Honolulu, reporting when veterans are due Oct. 2 (Henson, Pugmire, Kelly 2003: 1).

After it was clear that Bryant would attend Lakers preseason camp in Hawaii, the focus shifted to when Bryant would attend the camp. This information was important to the media because he would address the press for the first time in many weeks. Initially, Bryant was to attend camp with the rest of the team:

Bryant had told team officials a few weeks ago he would accompany the veterans to Hawaii on Thursday and address the media Friday. Bryant is facing a preliminary hearing in his sexual-assault case Oct. 9 and still doesn't know the trial date. But he has said he would begin the season with the team. He even outlined how he would deal with the media, preferring the "typical" session on the basketball court after practice rather than in a separate room. (Smith 2003m: 1).

Bryant missed the team flight to Hawaii. His no-show raised speculation as to whether the emotional state of the trial would keep him from attending camp and possible the season.

The Los Angeles Lakers were wondering where Kobe Bryant was when he missed the team charter flight here from Los Angeles on Thursday. Bryant had been expected to attend a team meeting Thursday night and address the media at practice Friday for the first time since his arrest in July on sexual assault charges. The Lakers didn't seem to know whether Bryant, indeed, was ill or whether he is in some fragile emotional state because of the charges against him and doesn't want to face his teammates and the growing media contingent here. Though the Lakers said Bryant could arrive Friday or Saturday, they did not dismiss the possibility he might skip training camp entirely. (Smith 2003m: 1).

Bryant did travel to Hawaii the following day to attend camp; he also spoke to the media. Using quirky puns, the press emphasized that Bryant handled the questions well: “The question came hard from the right, Kobe Bryant turning to intercept it like a quick pass aimed for a layup. Like on the basketball court, Bryant didn't hesitate... Bryant spoke confidently and openly without going into legal details of his case” (Smith 2003c: 1). But the main question was left to speculation – Would Bryant play basketball in light of the allegations? “Bryant remains out on bail and is to attend a preliminary hearing Thursday in Eagle. He was a day late for practice because of an illness he declined to disclose. It again fueled debate about whether Bryant should play with the legal issues hanging over him and whether he will be more distraction to the team, most of whom

watched with amusement as a six-deep ring of media gathered around Bryant and three security guards” (Smith 2003c: 1).

Following the press conference at preseason camp, the focus shifted back to the October 9, 2003 preliminary hearing. This was namely so, because Bryant would play in exhibition games schedule against Golden State on October 7, 2003, two days prior to the first preliminary hearing.

Bryant will practice with the team and may play in the team's Oct. 7 exhibition game against Golden State, which also has training camp in Hawaii. Bryant is scheduled to attend a preliminary hearing in Eagle two days later (Smith 2003h: 2).

As the preliminary hearing commenced, the link between preseason camp and the court appearance resurfaced. The preliminary hearing was to determine if the prosecutors could meet the burden of proof to carry the charges to trial; the main aspect of the preliminary centered on the direct testimony of Eagle County Sheriff’s Detective Doug Winters who interviewed the accuser. The article discusses the testimony: “Winters gave the first detailed account of what happened in Bryant's hotel room June 30, based on a videotaped interview he made with the woman the following day” (Teaford, Henson, and Abrahamson 2003: 1). The news article, however, notes as to where Bryant was preceding his attendance, the support Bryant has from the Lakers organization, and preseason camp.

Bryant, who had been in Hawaii at Lakers training camp, arrived at the courthouse in a three-vehicle convoy. He did not speak to people outside.

Cameras were not allowed in the courtroom. Bryant, 25, has been free on \$25,000 bond. If convicted, he faces a sentence of four years to life. The Lakers have stood by Bryant, who had arrived a day late to training camp because of an undisclosed illness. He practiced with teammates for several days but did not play in the Lakers' first two exhibition games. There was no word about when he would rejoin the team (Teaford, Henson, and Abrahamson 2003: 1).

Due to the evidence presented at the preliminary hearing, the judge ordered that Bryant would stand trial for the sexual assault allegations. The judge also set further court dates in which Bryant was expected to appear. These court dates too, received attention as they fell upon scheduled games during the Lakers' regular season play.

Bryant's next court appearance will be at a hearing Nov. 10 in Eagle. The Lakers are scheduled to play in Memphis that night (Henson 2003: 1).

It's also possible that Bryant could miss a game in February and two in March because of hearings regarding the sexual assault charge he faces in Colorado (Nadal 2004: 3).

Bryant was going to have to miss Monday night's game at Indiana to attend a two-day hearing related to his sexual assault case in Eagle, Colo. (*The Chicago Tribune*, January 31, 2004: 6).

In a third juxtaposition between the preliminary hearings and basketball, *The Chicago Tribune* examined on where the trial may fit into the scheme of the regular season, and whether or not Bryant would be able to play.

Bryant's first court date will be Aug. 6, Hurlbert said, when he will be arraigned and have bail set. The prosecutor would not speculate about when a trial might take place. Assuming the case does go to trial, Bryant's attorneys will have an incentive to make sure it takes place outside basketball season, which runs from October until May, plus a six-week-long postseason in which the Lakers hope to participate. Brian McIntyre, the NBA's senior vice president for basketball communications, said Bryant would be allowed to play while the case was pending (*The Chicago Tribune*, July 19, 2003: 1).

As more and more preliminary motions and appeals filed by prosecutors and the defense, the newspaper mixed in comments as to when a trial would begin and where it would fit into the scheme of the regular season. For example:

No one knows when--or if--a trial will take place. Legal experts are divided. They say a trial could happen anywhere from the middle of the NBA season to next summer (Smith 2003h: 2).

Legal experts say the earliest a trial could begin is February or March; it could also be pushed back until next summer, after the NBA season (Sarche 2003b: 6).

In a final example of how *The Chicago Tribune* emphasized basketball, the newspaper frequently noted that Bryant would miss the 2004 Olympics because of the sexual assault. On July 20, 2003, almost three weeks after the scandal broke, The Chicago Tribune noted that “Bryant also could miss playing with the U.S. Olympic qualifying team, which begins practice Aug. 10 in New York” (Reid 2003: 3). Nine spots were open for the 2004 Olympics, and Kobe Bryant was guaranteed one of those spots (Smith 2003d: 2). However, a spot on the team “could open up if Lakers guard Kobe Bryant is unable to play because of his sexual assault trial in Colorado” (*The Chicago Tribune*, March 18, 2004: 2). In fact, Bryant withdrew from participation (Smith 2003b). Following word of Bryant’s absence on the ballot, *The Chicago Tribune* frequently noted Bryant’s replacement, noting that the replacement was not equal to Bryant’s popularity with basketball fans: “[Vince] Carter is on the team as a replacement for Kobe Bryant, the player who eclipsed Carter in the hearts and minds of NBA fans as the next great thing in pro basketball” (Smith 2003b: 2). However, Vince Carter would also turn down the offer to compete in the Olympics.

After the final Olympic roster was released, the media mentioned that the “U.S. Olympic team to be no one’s dream” (Smith 2004j: 2) as “an unprecedented number of top NBA players rejected invitations this year...Most of the NBA’s elite players – Shaquille O’Neal, Kevin Garnett, Kobe Bryant, Tracy McGrady, Jermaine O’Neal and Vince Carter – are missing” (Smith 2004k: 2). When the U.S. team lost to Argentina in the semi-final round, the newspaper was quick to note that “there’s little doubt [the U.S. team] would have won with the players who elected not to go to Athens, like Kevin Garnett, Tracy McGrady, Jason Kidd, Kobe Bryant and Vince Carter” (Smith 2004b:2).

The newspaper believed that if Kobe Bryant (among other athletically talent players) was able to attend the Olympics, then the U.S. would have won. However, the sexual assault trial blocked Bryant's opportunity to compete.

The newspaper connected the sexual assault case to basketball, juxtaposing the two aspects of Bryant's persona (criminal defendant versus professional athlete). By discussing Bryant's attendance at preseason camp, exhibition games, regular season games, and the NBA season, *The Chicago Tribune* conveyed the message that the games were equally or more important than the sexual assault allegations. Or at the least, *The Chicago Tribune* posited as questionable to which of the two sorts of events was more important. In one final example, this blurring of the lines is apparent. An October 29, 2003 article presents the games of the NBA season that "you'll want to see this season" (Smith 2003e: 8). The April 11, 2004 match-up between Western Conference Lakers and Kings is certainly a series to watch. However, notes the journalist, "this could be the time that Kobe Bryant is going to trial" (Smith 2003e: 8), and therefore, by implication, the game is not nearly as exciting or important to watch.

External Lures Are to Blame

The Chicago Tribune acknowledged that Bryant confessed to an affair, but blamed outside agents for inducing or allowing Bryant's adulterous behavior. This helped Bryant to maintain the image of a man who loved his family, but who had succumbed to the temptations that these outside agents allowed.

Immediately following official charges of sexual assault, Kobe Bryant spoke to the press for the first time. He publicly denied that he forced the accuser to do anything

against her will. Rather, he stated that he and the young woman had sexual intercourse and that it was consensual. "I didn't force her to do anything against her will. I'm innocent. I sit here in front of you guys furious at myself, disgusted at myself for making the mistake of adultery" (Reid 2003; Wilbon 2003).

The confession of adultery proved strategic to Bryant as it provided a foundation to challenge the sexual assault charges; the incident in the Colorado hotel room was not rape, but consensual sex. As one journalist notes: "By admitting he had sex with a young woman, Los Angeles Lakers star Kobe Bryant, who was formally charged with sexual assault Friday in Colorado, turned his sexual assault case into a credibility contest rather than a trial that will center on DNA evidence, legal analysts said" (Weinstein 2003: 1). "Battling the case out on the issue of credibility normally 'moves the ball more into your court,'" noted Loyola-Marymount Law School professor Laurie Levenson (Weinstein 2003: 1).

In the 274 articles examined, the reference to consensual sex within *The Chicago Tribune* was the most frequently acknowledged tactic (n = 60) stated on the side of the defense. For example:

Los Angeles Laker star Kobe Bryant is charged with sexually assaulting a 19-year-old employee of the hotel where he was a guest. The woman admits to entering his room voluntarily, but says Bryant blocked the door when she tried to leave and raped her. Bryant has admitted to having sex with the accuser, but claims that it was consensual (Parker 2003: 25).

Bryant, a 25-year-old NBA All-Star with the Los Angeles Lakers, posted a \$25,000 bond after being arrested in July for allegedly raping a 19-year-old female concierge at an Eagle resort. Bryant was in Eagle for knee surgery. Bryant has said the two had consensual sex and that he is innocent of the felony sexual-assault charge that he faces (Bender 2003: 9).

With this defensive tactic, however, the family-man aspect of Bryant's overall image took a hit. The newspaper acknowledged that the confession was "an ugly stain on a previously spotless life" (Sheridan 2003: 2), as he put "his reputation and his family's future in jeopardy" (Page 2003: 21). "He opened himself up to this by having sex with a stranger while he was in Colorado for knee surgery, and while wife Vanessa and their baby daughter were home in L.A." (Sheridan 2003: 2). The confession to adultery undermined the prior characterization standard of Bryant as a devoted family man.

However, in light of the confession, interesting notes on the part of the journalists surfaced in the articles. Appearing in the articles immediately following Bryant's press release on July 18, 2003, writers referred to outside agents that may have allowed or fostered Bryant's adultery, wittingly or unwittingly. These news writers blamed the media for creating a false image about Kobe Bryant, and the NBA and society for expecting professional athletes not to succumb to temptations.

Tribune writer Morrissey (2003) blamed the media for creating a false image of Bryant, for racist reasons: "Bryant is: a commodity, a package, a highly stylized product. And what his handlers have been trying to sell us since he came into the NBA is class, the same currency others have used to sell Jordan. Bryant was the anti-Iverson. In other

words, he was supposed to feel safer to white people” (p. 1). The media told American society that “Kobe was different...mature beyond his years. Married to the love of his life. Didn't run with the pack. A homebody” (Morrissey 2003, p. 1). Therefore, society was led to believe that Bryant could be trusted. But then, “he wanted a few things not found on the room-service menu, had relations with a 19-year-old hotel worker who visited him while he was staying near Vail, Colo.,” and found himself as a defendant in a sexual assault case (p. 1). Page (2003), a colleague of Morrissey’s, is similarly critical of the media: “We think we know media celebrities but we really don't. We know their media-filtered images. This usually means that we know them as being basically nice, intelligent and mild-mannered, as we have known Kobe Bryant. Or we know them as Mike Tyson, a caricature who frightens small children. In real life, those are both stereotypes. Real people are complicated” (p. 21). Because of the marketing ploy, and the stereotype produced, the fall of Bryant was great. In other words, because of the media society held Bryant in a high regard, and when he fell, he fell hard. The lesson to be learned, notes Morrissey (2003), is that “perfect guys usually aren’t” (p. 1).

Other articles in *The Chicago Tribune* blamed the NBA, not only for the organization’s naïve expectations of its athletes, but also for the lifestyle the organization encourages. “I just don't understand how the NBA expects to pluck people out of high school, give them millions of dollars and expect them to act like responsible adults when they have never had to be responsible for themselves for one day in their lives” (Jones 2003: 2). In essence, the NBA is a forum where “urgent gratification meets entitlement to form an immediacy for a player to indulge” (Roberts 2003: 2). The sexual assault allegation is “what happens without a chaperone,” notes journalist Roberts (2003). Even

though “players should be their own keepers” she continues, the athletes that enter “the most immature of big-time pro leagues” may have a hard time resisting the “siren’s song of instant access” that the NBA lifestyle provides (p. 2).

The message seems to be that we cannot blame athletes for succumbing to sexual temptations that come with celebrity while celebrity status thwarts oversight. We are a “society totally given over to celebrity and fascination with the rich and famous” (Wilbon 2003: 2). *The Chicago Tribune* notes that our society practically anticipates and “sadly embraces” these temptations (Wentick 2003: 2). “It’s no wonder why all these high school athletes choose to skip college and an education to go to the NBA, where they can make millions of dollars and their ‘mistakes’ will be overlooked” (Wentick 2003: 2). Stamatis (2003) understood the temptations that face athletes “because it is not only professional athletes who miss the mark in the morality department. It’s all of us. All of us are tempted, at one point or another, in one way or another, in varying degrees. With professional athletes, however, you have the deadliest combination of circumstances, namely fame, money, constant travel and adoring men, women and children. Few could survive that crucible without getting burned” (p. 22).

Kobe Bryant confessed to adultery. It appeared as though the stereotypical family-man image was doomed to suffer from the charges against him. However, within the text and between news articles in *The Chicago Tribune*, this image was partially salvaged by the introduction of information that blamed outside agents for facilitating, and even expecting Bryant to engage in adultery. By acknowledging the role of the media, the NBA, and “society” in producing such behavior, the newspaper displaced

blame from Bryant to these outside agents. This allowed Bryant to partially maintain the image of a good man.

Further, the newspaper's critique of temptations reduces Bryant's alleged trespass, implicitly changing it from rape to adultery. In an example that further emphasizes this point, in an article from November 5, 2003, the journalist discusses how the Kobe Bryant case raises the issue of the word "panties," and where individuals should draw the line in using that word: "And with another pair of underwear-making headlines in the Kobe Bryant rape case and all of us seeing far more of each other's intimate garments than we used to thanks to Britney Spears, it seems time to draw the line on 'panties'" (Kiernan 2003: 1). The author, by juxtaposing the rape charge and use of the word "panties," minimizes the charge. The issue is reduced to simple semantics. In all, Bryant's speculative offense was reduced by journalists even before the charges were dropped in court.

Silver Lining in the Allegations

In the fourth tactic found in *The Chicago Tribune*, the newspaper stated that Bryant's inappropriate behavior may actually have benefited the Lakers team and the NBA. That is, the reporters called attention to the allegations' "silver lining." *The Chicago Tribune* wanted to know how the "menacing storm" (Smith 2003k: 2) brought by Bryant's legal issues would affect the Lakers and the NBA. In time, the paper noted that the Lakers benefited from the allegations because they brought the team together, creating a stronger, closer team. The allegations also benefited the NBA by boosting

television ratings (Isaacson 2003). By pointing out arguably positive consequences the newspaper gave the illusion that Bryant created something positive out of his immoral behavior, where in fact, real positive consequences were few and far between.

On September 29, 2003, *The Chicago Tribune* noted that the season looked promising to the Lakers, but due to the sexual assault allegations, the season “[wouldn’t] be an easy ride” (Smith 2003h: 2). Throughout the year-long ordeal, the Lakers and Bryant were “story line 1 in the NBA” (Smith 2003: 6), which automatically placed the Lakers in a “canopy of doubt” (Smith 2003g: 2). Due to the disturbing notoriety, news writers asked: “Can [the Lakers] withstand the distractions from Kobe Bryant's sexual assault case?...What will everyone be thinking when they meditate?” (Smith 2003: 6) and “Will the additional attention affect the other players? Will it wear on them as the season progresses?” (Smith 2003i: 2). The journalists in *The Chicago Tribune* were skeptical of the Lakers success, especially since the team’s star athlete was fighting charges that could keep him in prison and away from the team. The Lakers were bracing against “the unnerving shadow hanging over the season” as they waited for their “five-time NBA All-Star” to fight the charges that could keep him away from the team (Henson 2003: 1). It had appeared, as the newspaper described, that the Lakers were doomed to have a failure of a season.

However, in news articles in *The Chicago Tribune*, writers focused on how the allegations might actually be a good thing. The allegations might actually benefit the Lakers (Smith 2003j). *The Chicago Tribune* compared the hardships the Lakers faced to similar issues handled by the Chicago Bulls in the early 1990s with their star player Michael Jordan. As in news articles prior to the allegations, the newspaper again linked

Bryant and Michael Jordan. Just like Bryant, Jordan “wasn't always the most popular guy on the team” and at times “his talent was overwhelming the league--and often his team” (Smith 2003j: 2). In the 1990s, a criminal investigation of a murdered bail bondsman turned up a personal check of Jordan's; it was later learned that Jordan had been involved in illegal gambling (Smith 2003j). Amid the looming controversy, the Bulls, with former head coach Phil Jackson (and current Lakers head coach), “used the opportunity to persuade Jordan that his greatest safety and security came within the framework of the team. The team went on to set a franchise record for victories that season... It is sound personal advice for Bryant, but it also could benefit the Lakers” (Smith 2003j: 2). The trying time would allow the Lakers to become a more solid unit – “it will be a great Lakers team, not necessarily a team with great players” (Smith 2003j: 2).

In another interesting example of *The Chicago Tribune's* attempt to emphasize positive consequences of the sexual assault allegations, news writers focused upon statements made by Mark Cuban, owner of the Dallas Mavericks. Cuba stated that economically, the allegations against Bryant “would be great for the NBA.” (Isaacson 2003: 1). “From a business perspective” noted Cuban, “the unfortunate reality is that in this country, notoriety sells. You only need to look at Mike Tyson as the No. 1 draw in boxing as proof. I went back and tried to find examples in the entertainment business where it hurt. I couldn't. Can you? There is a reason why every media outlet is giving an over-weighted share of their time or columns to this story” (Isaacson 2003: 1). Cuban, who is well-known for his off-the-cuff remarks and sometimes unruly behavior at Mavericks' games, called the allegations “a tragedy for all those involved” and added

“I’m not saying this a good thing. I’m not saying it’s a positive reflection of who we are as a country. It’s just reality. It sells papers, it increases TV ratings. The NBA will benefit from that” (Isaacson 2003: 1). Not surprisingly, the remarks drew criticism from the NBA, women’s groups, and marketing experts. However, even critical writers responded to Cuban’s statements as inappropriate but accurate. Sheridan (2003b) noted that “Cuban actually has a point. In a twisted way, [the case] has generated more interest in Bryant than ever before” (p. 10). Wilbon (2003), a fellow writer of Sheridan further noted that “Cuban has makes sense,” because “we’re a society totally given over to celebrity and fascination with the rich and famous” (Wilbon 2003: 2). Morrissey (2003b) believes that our focus on celebrities allows them to be forgiven more easily: “Americans love to forgive celebrities. Americans fall over one another in their rush to forgive...Bryant will be cheered when he returns to the basketball court for the first time. He’ll be cheered the 10th time and the 100th time too” (p. 1). These will be the fans that drive attendance records and apparel sales, and who will “bring a lot of attention to Bryant, the Lakers and the NBA.” (p. 1).

By providing other, positive arguments about the sexual assault case, *The Chicago Tribune* writers distracted readers from Bryant’s own misconduct. By focusing on the Lakers and the NBA, the newspaper again gave more weight to issues surrounding basketball than to the sexual assault allegations and its negative consequences. The attention the newspaper gave to the Lakers and team unity, and to Cuban’s inappropriate remarks, inadvertently gave Bryant credit for the positive consequences that arose from his negative act.

'Court To The Court'

After the NBA season started with Kobe Bryant playing in his normal guard position with the Lakers, *The Chicago Tribune* praised Bryant's ability to go from the "court-to-the-court" (Smith 2004j: 3). "The Lakers have won each time he has been in court, and Bryant has been spectacular" (Smith 2004c: 2). With each win, the newspaper increasingly added to the depiction of Bryant. Initially, the newspaper referred to him as the "basketball star" (*The Chicago Tribune*, January 7, 2004: 8), but as he played better and better basketball, the newspaper soon labeled Bryant as one of the best athletes in the game, even calling his performances "heroic" (Smith 2004i: 9). By juxtaposing Bryant's time as a criminal defendant versus a basketball player, *The Chicago Tribune* made the success on the court all the more spectacular. In all, the emphasis upon basketball brings focus to Bryant's life on the court, deflating attention from the impending sexual assault trial.

Initially, *The Chicago Tribune* wondered how Bryant would handle the "distraction" of the sexual assault allegations. "Will he be distracted by all the ancillary issues facing him? Will he be more motivated? Will Bryant even be around to finish the season?" asked the newspaper, as "never has a star of his magnitude in the NBA, perhaps in any sport, been involved in such an allegedly sordid, potentially destructive incident" (Smith 2003l: 2). The newspaper, however, predicted that Bryant's "single-mindedness toward basketball," a "trait that often separated him from his less-talented teammates" will allow him to get through this ordeal (Smith 2003l: 2).

David Stern, the NBA commissioner, allowed Bryant to play for the 2003-2004 season stating that Bryant was “innocent until proven guilty” (*The Chicago Tribune*, November 5, 2003: 26). With permission to play basketball, news writers opined that basketball was precisely what Bryant needed. “[Kobe] says he’ll deal with the legal issues as they occur, but he is glad to be back with his Los Angeles Lakers teammates and doing what he does best, which is play basketball” (Smith 2003i: 1). Playing basketball “is what is best for Kobe” and what will help him endure the upcoming court appearances and possible trial (Smith 2003i: 1). “Bryant likened the basketball court to a psychiatrist's couch” (Smith 2004: 1).

During the 2003-2004 season Bryant showed “once again that he can play some basketball,” especially during the games from which he arrived straight from court appearances in Colorado (Smith 2003o: 2). In December of 2003, after the judge “met privately with attorneys arguing over the medical history of the woman accusing the NBA star of rape...Bryant then returned to Los Angeles but did not arrive at the Staples Center in time to start for the Lakers against Denver” (Sarche 2003: 5). It was at this game that Bryant “hit a 21-foot jumper at the buzzer, giving the Los Angeles Lakers a 101-99 victory over the Denver Nuggets... Bryant finished with 13 points and five assists in 31 minutes after missing the first quarter because he didn't return from the hearing in time for tipoff. It was the first time since 1999 he'd come off the bench” (*The Chicago Tribune*, December 21, 2003: 20).

As the time of playoffs drew closer, the newspaper gave more weight to Bryant’s basketball abilities. When Bryant made “two incredible shots” to help the Lakers win the NBA Pacific Division title, the newspaper called him a “hero” (*The Chicago Tribune*,

April 15, 2004: 10). “Bryant sent the game into overtime with a stunning three-pointer at the buzzer, then drilled another three on the final play of the second overtime to give Los Angeles a 105-104 victory over the host Portland Trail Blazers on Wednesday night” (*The Chicago Tribune*, April 15, 2004: 10). This win secured an appearance in the playoffs for the Lakers.

The first round of playoff action for the Lakers was against the Houston Rockets. Entering game five of the seven game series, the Lakers were up 3 games to 1. A win would put them into the second round of playoff contention. Following a court appearance where the judge set a court date for Bryant to officially enter his plea (Sarche 2004), Bryant “arrived just in time to lead the Los Angeles Lakers into the dream match up of the NBA playoffs” (*The Chicago Tribune*, April 29, 2004: 8). “After spending most of the last three days in a Colorado courtroom, Bryant had 31 points, six rebounds and 10 assists Wednesday night and the Lakers beat the Houston Rockets 97-78 to win their first-round series 4-1” (*The Chicago Tribune*, April 29, 2004: 8).

As time wore on, the newspaper made out the appearances between the two courts as routine, depicting Bryant’s travels as “another one of those court-to-court days” or as an “old hat for Bryant” (Smith, 2004h: 1). This was so for Game 4 of the second round of playoff contention; this game received the most attention from *The Chicago Tribune*. Prior to the start of the game, “Bryant was in court in Colorado...making his not guilty plea in his sexual assault case” (Smith 2004e: 3). Following this plea, “he returned before the game and was exceptional. Bryant, dashing around the court with remarkable fervor given the extraordinary circumstances of his day, led all scorers with 18 first half points while adding four rebounds and three assists” (Smith 2004e: 3). “Bryant had one

of the greatest playoff games ever” commented news writer Simers (2004) continuing, “all the more remarkable, the performance came a few hours after Bryant returned from Colorado, where he entered a plea of not guilty in his sexual assault case” (p. 12). In fact, the newspaper made Bryant’s Game 4 performance out to be something extraordinary: “Kobe Bryant's to-do list Thursday apparently looked something like this: Wake at 4 a.m., fly to Colorado to sit in court most of the day, hear ugly things said about you and wish you never had gone there in the first place, fly home, take a nap, read the scouting report on the Minnesota Timberwolves, get some intravenous fluids, score 31 points and lead the Lakers to a 92-85 victory in Game 4 of the NBA Western Conference finals” (Smith 2004h: 1).

During this playoff game Bryant left news writers “awestruck by his talent show” (Smith 2004:1). The playoffs are “a time for great players to stand up,” noted Smith (2004), “it's what Bryant does better than anyone in the NBA. No, he never really has been close in MVP voting. But no one since Jordan fills up the screen for a big moment like Bryant...Bryant often is criticized for being selfish, a double standard Jordan rarely faced. One can't be great in sport without taking chances, without enduring some criticism. Players like Bryant rise above it” (p. 1). Bryant “has re-established himself as the best basketball player in the NBA” (Smith 2004i: 9). “Once again, Bryant has demonstrated he's the best player in the league, if not the most decorated” (Smith 2004i: 9).

The news writers in *The Chicago Tribune* added to the mystique of Bryant by expressing amazement that he is even able to play basketball with a possible trial and prison time looming: “How many sleepless nights has Bryant had wondering if he'll go

to prison. For a very long time. That Bryant even is able to think about basketball is amazing” (Smith 2003f: 1). Smith (2004c) further states that, “Bryant remains out on bail. He faces felony charges of sexual assault. He is expected to go to trial this summer and could face years in prison. Just how he can play, at times, is remarkable” (p. 2).

Bryant’s participation in these basketball games was covered well; namely because he had attended court the same day. Bryant’s performance on the basketball court after court appearances swayed attention *away* from the allegations, as his performance reestablished his reputation. News writers were presented with an opportunity to use old metaphors for his abilities, thereby recalling images of a previously virtuous persona, and contrasting two very different images: criminal defendant and professional athlete. Further, in Bryant’s ability to handle both the court appearances and the basketball games, there was an opportunity for the newspaper to refer to other positive characteristics, such as his maturity and tenacity. These references minimized the effect of the sexual assault allegations, while also giving *The Chicago Tribune* the opportunity to introduce information that was consistent with pre-allegation coverage, giving coherence to the text and credibility to the newspaper.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented above suggest that *The Chicago Tribune* reconstructed Kobe Bryant's image in order to maintain their own credibility. Credibility was generated out of consistency. *The Chicago Tribune* reconciled the past positive construction of Bryant with the current negative aspects of the sexual assault allegations through five tactics that I have called: (1) case is not paramount, (2) case is hindering basketball, (3) external lures are to blame, (4) silver lining in the allegations, (5) "court-to-the-court."

In the original search of news articles published in *The Chicago Tribune* from June 30, 2003 to August 31, 2004, very few articles – 82 articles out of 564 articles (14.2 percent) – were devoted to the factual matters surrounding the sexual assault trial. This small percent of articles is noteworthy. Legal decisions, court appearances, motions, and appeals, all had an important impact upon the accuser and Kobe Bryant, and therefore, might have received more focused coverage. Further, I found that 80 articles out of 82 articles (97.6 percent) were relegated to the sports section of *The Chicago Tribune*. The placement of the articles in the sport section further trivializes the sexual assault case to a section that regularly deals with events that are considered "play" or "fun." However, is it surprising that rape allegations against a professional sport player be relegated to the sport section? Sport writer consistently cover egregious acts by professional players, such as the case of Mike Tyson.

Instead, it appeared that 290 articles from the original 564 articles were filler articles, or were devoted to basketball matters, such as how many points Bryant scored in the previous game, Bryant's free agency options, or Bryant's injury updates. The large

number of irrelevant articles muddled the information stemming from the impending sexual assault trial.

A second device emerged during my analysis of the 274 articles. I called this device, case is hindering basketball because I discerned that *The Chicago Tribune* devoted much attention to connecting court appearances to basketball. Following the formal charges of sexual assault, the newspaper would frequently note whether Bryant would miss or attend preseason camp, exhibition games, and regular season games, as well as where the trial would fit into the scheme of the NBA regular season. By contrasting the court appearances with basketball games, *The Chicago Tribune* blurred the line between which appearance was more important, and may have also put the two sorts of appearances on the same moral plane. Emphasizing that Bryant would miss preseason camp and exhibition games, regular season games, and possibly the entire NBA season with the Lakers, the newspaper hinted at the fact that the trial was getting in the way of basketball; Bryant's playing time in the NBA is more important than his trial. In addition, by introducing aspects of Bryant's life that were positive, it downplayed negative aspects of Bryant's life that arose with the sexual assault allegations. Connecting basketball games to court appearance, the news writers were able to write about Bryant as they had done prior to the allegations – in respect to playing basketball. By introducing basketball into these news reports, the newspaper provided its readers with information that was familiar.

A third device found – external lures are to blame – during full analysis concerned Bryant's confession to adultery. Bryant publicly denied the allegation of sexual assault, but stated that he and the accuser had consensual sex. This confession was the

foundation to challenge the allegations; by admitting that he had sex with the desk clerk, the trial now turned into a “he-said,” “she-said” credibility contest. However, this confession swung another way: it demolished the prior characterization of Bryant as a devoted and faithful family man.

In light of the public confession to adultery, a number of articles appeared in *The Chicago Tribune* that referred to outside agents that may have been to blame for Bryant’s adultery. Journalists at the newspaper blamed the media, the NBA, and society at large. They blamed the media for constructing a virtuous, yet false, image of Bryant; this stereotypical image created a false sense that Bryant was a good guy and therefore, when the allegations were alleged, the fall of Bryant was devastating for not only Bryant, but for those who believed in him as well. Society was led to believe that Bryant was perfect, when in fact he was not. So, in a sense, the media is at fault for constructing Bryant to be something that he was not. Another journalist blamed the NBA for its naïve expectations of its athletes and for the lifestyle the organization encouraged. By blaming the NBA, the journalist pointed the finger away from Bryant, and toward the temptations provided. In fact, society anticipates and embraces athletes that succumb to temptations, notes another news writers, as anyone in society would be susceptible to these temptations. Even though Kobe Bryant confessed to adultery, it appeared that *The Chicago Tribune* partially salvaged his positive by a critique of outside agents that encouraged Bryant’s trespass.

Further, the newspaper’s critique on temptations implicitly reduced the trespass committed by Bryant from rape – which would involve more reprehensible causes – to adultery. Bryant’s speculative offense was reduced to journalist, even before the charges

were dropped in court. Bryant, therefore, maintained his image of a man who loved his family, but who succumbed to temptation as anyone would.

The fourth device that I found in *The Chicago Tribune* was silver lining in the allegations. Within and between the news articles published in *The Chicago Tribune*, news writers wrote that Bryant's inappropriate behavior may actually have positive (if unattended) benefits for the Lakers team and the NBA. The Lakers benefited because the allegations incorporated the cohesiveness of the team. The allegations also benefited the NBA by boosting newspaper sales and television ratings. By pointing out positive consequences, the newspaper gave the illusion that Bryant created something positive out of his transgressive behavior, real positive consequences were few and far between. Further, the newspaper gave more weight to issues surrounding basketball (the Lakers and the NBA) than to the sexual assault allegations and its negative consequences.

In the final device called "court to the court," Bryant's participation in both court appearances and basketball games was well covered. The articles did not sway the attention towards the sexual assault allegations, but towards Bryant's athletic talents. His performances on the basketball court re-established his reputation as a talented athlete. By juxtaposing Bryant's time as a criminal defendant versus a basketball player, *The Chicago Tribune* made the success on the court all the more spectacular. In all, the emphasis upon basketball brought the focus back to Bryant's life on the court, minimizing the negative attention to Bryant's life off the court.

In addition, with Bryant's ability to handle both the court appearances and the basketball games, there was an opportunity for the newspaper to refer to newly manifest traits, such as his maturity and tenacity. In other words, the pre-allegation references to

his athletic ability minimized the effect of the sexual assault allegations, while also giving *The Chicago Tribune* the opportunity to introduce information that was consistent with pre-allegation coverage, giving coherence to the text and credibility to the newspaper. The findings presented above suggest that *The Chicago Tribune* maintained a consistent line about Kobe Bryant, a Los Angeles Lakers Basketball player who was portrayed as virtuous prior to an allegation of sexual assault, as part of the project of maintaining their own credibility.

The references away from the sexual assault trial and towards positive aspects about Bryant reflect the media's role of reconstruction. The ability to merge past positive attributes with new negative attributes allowed *The Chicago Tribune* to salvage Bryant's image, while at the same time salvaging the newspaper's image of credibility. The blurring of the lines between professional basketball player and criminal defendant gave the newspaper a way to maintain some consistency in their reporting of Bryant.

The Kobe Bryant sexual assault case is nearly three years old. At the time of the allegations, Bryant's image was easily salvageable by *The Chicago Tribune*, as Bryant had no prior bad acts; even his selfish play was dismissed by most writers as a teenager learning the ropes of the NBA. Immediately following the dismissal of the charges, the allegations had little effect on the overall image of Bryant. However, it is uncertain if the charges will disappear from the mediate history of Kobe Bryant. As the years pass, the sexual assault allegation may rear its ugly head, if other, new behavior by Bryant is called into question. If other discrepant information – even concerning minor acts – arises, the media may change its tone about Bryant, as consistency now centers on his inappropriate behavior.

This paper raises serious questions about the media. It appeared as though the media were influenced by their own construction of Bryant. Pre-trial coverage of Bryant portrayed him as especially decent and virtuous, and when the sexual assault was alleged appeared, *The Chicago Tribune* needed to continue with this portrayal in order to maintain credibility. Yet, there is a catch-22 that lies in this thinking. Since *The Chicago Tribune* portrayed him as virtuous prior to the allegation, then it was easier for the newspaper to portray him as so after the allegation arose. In other words, the pre-allegation image created by *The Chicago Tribune* had a discernible effect on the post-allegation coverage. Prior reputation certainly played a role in the kind of coverage a celebrity, such as a professional athlete, will receive, especially if the stereotypical characterization of the individual fits into a certain type; the hero, the villain, or the fool will guide the media to portray them in a certain way.

For example, how would the media portray a professional athlete that fit the stereotypical characterization of a villain? Would the findings above be similar for a person with this villainous persona? Would the newspaper present consistent information about a villain who was alleged to do something heroic or virtuous? That is, does the nature of the media's initial construction of an individual (or, for that matter, a group) affect re-construction? Consider the example that in 2007 National Football League quarterback Michael Vick who was convicted of dog fighting. This conviction severely hurt Vick's image. What if Vick, a man who is positioned as a "villain" in mainstream society, did something that was extraordinarily virtuous? How would the media portray him? Would they maintain consistency and reconcile the old, negative aspects of his persona with the new, positive aspects? The findings above suggest that the media might

indeed reconcile the past, negative image of Vick with the new, positive behavior. If the virtuous behavior continued, consistency (in relation to his image) would rest upon the string of new, positive behaviors.

However, an important question remains: is the early characterization of the individual disproportionately important? Does the label originally attached to the person sway the media representation? It is possible that an initial deviant label is more resilient than an initial standard label. Arguably, the deviant label may act as a master status which overrides other statuses that a person possesses or may possess; the tag one receives may inhibit the individual from being viewed in another way (Becker 1964; Scheff 1975). In other words, once a person is stigmatized with a deviant label, the deviant label may be hard to shake.

Of course, the Michael Vick case is different from the Kobe Bryant case. Vick was actually convicted of the dog fighting charges, while Bryant's charges were dismissed. Also, visual images of dog fighting provided by television, Internet, and newspaper reports might have a discernable effect. Media research points to the power of visual images in the news as visual images "tend to be more vivid, salient, and memorable than auditory or textual information" (Schram, Soss, and Fording 2003: 135). Since dog fighting images are acceptable to impute into television, newspaper, or Internet news articles, then these images may sway an audience to react differently than to images that are not acceptable, such as sexual assault. Thus, Vick may have been viewed as more vile because of the dog fighting images than other individuals, such as Bryant, who perform other immoral or lawless behavior.

On a general note, the media do not just report the days events from scratch; rather, they follow a thread. Past reporting shapes present reporting, and present reporting shapes future reporting. However, if there were no coherence from past reporting to present reporting to future reporting then the news would be hard to follow. As Linde (1993) notes, a great deal of confusion arises when events do not seem to fit the ongoing story; individuals will remain uneasy about the situation until the story has been changed to accommodate the new information. Therefore, journalists and media organization must maintain some coherence between stories in order for any single story to make sense.

It is important to understand the media. The media, through its selective presentation of events and its categorization of people provides vital information to its consumers. It is an institution that prides itself on providing people with factual, fair, unbiased, and balanced information. The media's interpretation and presentation of the Kobe Bryant sexual assault case provided readers with a lasting narrative about the events that transpired and the people involved in those events. The media, it appears, is largely in control of how society views a celebrated person involved in such as scandal as the Kobe Bryant sexual assault case (as most of us don't have first hand knowledge of the event). The media's impression management on Bryant's behalf has potentially grave implications for the independence of that institution. We should consider it a serious situation when coverage is adjusted or becomes increasingly subjective, since the media provide a most basic foundation for how we view our social world.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

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APPENDIX B

Bryant Records Get OK
Chicago Tribune
August 29, 2003
Author: Tribune news services.

Prosecutors in the sexual-assault case against Kobe Bryant said Thursday they will not appeal a judge's order to release some of the sealed court records.

The documents slated for release will not threaten Bryant's right to a fair trial or the privacy rights of the woman who has accused the Los Angeles Lakers' star of rape, District Atty. Mark Hurlbert said.

Last week Judge Frederick Gannett ruled the arrest warrant and related documents could be released to the public. More detailed documents, including the arrest affidavit and search warrant, were to remain sealed. Gannett gave attorneys 10 days to appeal.

Chris Beall, an attorney representing media organizations seeking the release of all the records, said his clients will decide by the Tuesday deadline whether to appeal.

- A jury in Saginaw, Mich., convicted Golden State Warriors forward Jason Richardson of a misdemeanor domestic-violence charge stemming from an assault on his former girlfriend.

- Portland Trail Blazers guard Damon Stoudamire may stand trial Sept. 29 in Tucson, Ariz., on misdemeanor drug charges, depending on the outcome of arguments that day over a motion to suppress evidence stemming from a search July 3 of Stoudamire at Tucson International Airport that discovered what police alleged was a small amount of marijuana.

- The Pistons traded starting small forward Michael Curry to the Toronto Raptors for Lindsey Hunter in a move that will give Detroit more depth at point guard.

Memo: PRO BASKETBALL.
Edition: Chicago Final
Section: Sports
Page: 11
Column: PRESS BOX.
Index Terms: BASKETBALL; PRO; BRIEFS
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Record Number: CTR0308290255

APPENDIX C

Skakel retrial urged based on new claim
Chicago Tribune
September 7, 2003
Author: Items compiled from Tribune news services.

A relative of Los Angeles Lakers guard Kobe Bryant has implicated two friends in the 1975 murder for which Kennedy cousin Michael Skakel was convicted, a lawyer for Skakel said Saturday.

Defense lawyer Hope Seeley said Skakel will seek a new trial based on information from Gitano "Tony" Bryant, cousin of the NBA player.

Skakel, a nephew of Ethel Kennedy, was convicted last year and sentenced to 20 years to life in prison for the beating death of Martha Moxley, 15.

The Hartford Courant reported Saturday that Tony Bryant said two friends were the killers. They were not identified.

Edition: Chicago Final
Section: News
Page: 19
Column: ACROSS THE NATION.
Index Terms: CONNECTICUT; MURDER; PROBE
Dateline: HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT
Copyright 2003, Chicago Tribune
Record Number: CTR0309070495

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