

**A BREAKDOWN OF CRITICISMS OF ESPN BIASES
AND A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS BEHIND THE MOTIVATION**

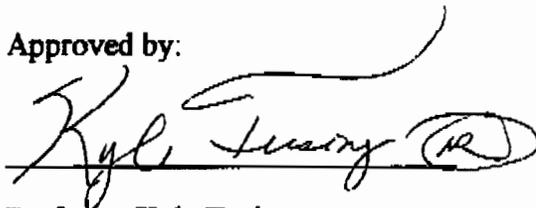
**By
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**A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree
With Honors in
Communications**

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

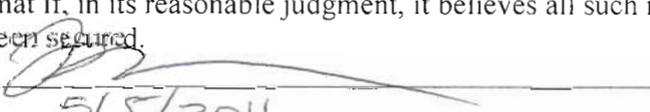
MAY 2011

Approved by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kyle Tusing" with a circled "R" at the end. The signature is written over a horizontal line.

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Honors area (eg Molecular and Cellular Biology, English, Studio Art): <u>Communication</u>	
Date thesis submitted to Honors College: <u>5/5/2011</u>	
Title of Honors thesis: <p style="text-align: center; font-size: 1.2em;">A Breakdown of Criticisms of ESPN Biases and a Theoretical Analysis Behind the Motivation</p>	
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Abstract

There are millions of sports fans that rely on communication media on a daily basis to meet their sports needs. Due to the insatiable appetite of sports fans around the world to glean the latest sports information, Entertainment Sports Programming Network (ESPN) attempts to meet this need and satisfy the hunger of sports fans.

Previous research has been conducted regarding the biases of ESPN. My current research focuses on these biases through a different lens. I will address ESPN bias from a purely theoretical and academic perspective, focusing specifically on three communication theories: agenda setting, interpersonal deception theory, and the spiral of silence. My research will focus on the biases and analyze why such biases are present and what influences ESPN's decision to give prominent coverage to one story or game, over another. My research will consist of focusing on a small number of sports stories that have been criticized by sports fans and experts alike for being biased at any level.

Introduction

There are millions of sports fans that rely on communication media on a daily basis to meet their sports needs, including: (a) updates on scores, (b) statistics, and (c) expert analysis and fantasy advice on their favorite players and teams. Due to the insatiable appetite of sports fans around the world to glean the latest sports information, Entertainment Sports Programming Network (ESPN, 2010) attempts to meet this need and satisfy the hunger of sports fans. ESPN has become a very successful company with a net worth over than 15 billion dollars and comprises four television channels with more than 200 million viewers worldwide, a radio station, a magazine, an Internet site, and now even multiple theme restaurants (EPSN, 2010).

ESPN is the leader in sports entertainment and content in more than 200 countries, which is why any issue concerning ESPN's delivery of sports is an important issue that should be addressed. After all, ESPN's own mission is "to serve fans wherever sports are watched, listened to, discussed, debated, read about or played" (ESPN, 2010). Research has been conducted regarding the biases of ESPN. However, the current research focuses on these biases through a different lens. Specifically, the biases of ESPN will be critiqued with a more theoretical, academic perspective. I will address ESPN bias from a purely theoretical and academic perspective, focusing specifically on three communication theories: agenda setting, interpersonal deception theory, and the spiral of silence. These theories were chosen after conducting a review

of major communication theories. The chosen theories are most directly applicable to the current research. Thus far, there has been limited academic research that focuses on ESPN biases.

However, there are an overwhelming amount of articles that have been written by sports enthusiasts as well as analysts concerning ESPN biases and favoritisms. My research will focus on the biases and analyze why such biases are present and what influences ESPN's decision to give prominent coverage to one story or game, over another.

It is unreasonable for the current research to cover each and every facet of ESPN bias ever believed or formulated. My research will consist of focusing on a small number of sports stories that have been criticized by sports fans and experts alike for being biased at any level.

The following ESPN stories are believed to be covered in a biased manner and have made big headlines. These stories include: (a) the east coast bias, (b) the Ben Roethlisberger sexual assault case, (c) the road to the LeBron James decision and the protection by ESPN for James, (d) Brett Favre's retirement decision and new sexual misconduct allegations, (e) and Texas Tech head coach Mike Leach and his controversial actions. Each one of these stories could be a thesis in itself. However, the current research provides a summary of each story.

Theory Overview: Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw):

Agenda-Setting theory states that the media tells us what to think about and then lets us form our own opinion (media sets the agenda). It is also believed in this theory that media does

not determine what people think. This theory recognizes that people are able to think for themselves and form their own beliefs and attitudes about what the media covers. The media however, does have tremendous influence on what the public perceives to be important. The question is: what indicates importance according to the media? For example, television will traditionally show prominence by covering a story as the lead story. Additionally, any stories that come up higher in the newscast are more important. Furthermore, prominence can be shown by how much time the network promotes to the story. Lastly, sometimes the media's agenda is not always related to the world at large. The media is too concerned with itself and sometimes not about the public (Griffin, 2006).

The East Coast Bias

Since its inception, sports fans and analysis have criticized ESPN for showing bias towards the east coast. Those people who profoundly believe in this bias argue that ESPN gives broadcasting privileges to east coast teams. Thus, west coast teams are left at a disadvantage and receive little recognition. Not only are certain east coast games broadcast more frequently than west coast games, but these same east coast teams also get more attention in news articles, on various ESPN channels, and on ESPN radio (Kopp, 2009). Major League Baseball provides a prime example of this occurrence. In January of 2010, ESPN released its Sunday night baseball coverage for the 2010 season. Six out of the first eight games aired on Sunday night baseball

involved either a National League east coast team or an American League east coast team.

Again, out of the eight games, five teams would make up teams from the Eastern Time Zone.

The popular east coast match up between the Boston Red Sox and New York Yankees would be played twice in the first six weeks of the season. The Red Sox-Yankees rivalry is a notable ESPN match up and one they favor consistently every year (Hogan, 2009). It was not until the Texas Rangers played the Minnesota Twins in week 9 on May 30th that a National League or American League team not from the east coast was featured as a Sunday night game. To watch a team from the west coast play, fans would have to wait until July 4th when the Kansas City Royals played the Los Angeles Angels. From college football to Major League Baseball the bias can be revealed in almost every sport (Hickey, 2010).

The acronym “ESPN” has been ridiculed by sports fans as standing for “eastern seaboard promotions network” (Kopp, 2009). The east coast bias is not something that a few fanatical individuals from the west believe in. In fact, according to a poll by Sports Nation in 2003, in which more than 43,000 fans responded, 70.5 percent of fans believe that “media coverage of sports is slanted toward the east” (Schreiber, 2008).

Application of Agenda-Setting Theory-ESPN

Does ESPN have an intended agenda to expose more east coast teams? According to research from the east coast bias, ESPN has consistently given more airtime to east coast teams.

There have been at least a few speculations as to why sports fans believe the east coast bias exists. One explanation is rooted in the location of ESPN's headquarters and the majority of its operations that are based on the east coast, in Bristol, Connecticut. The second reason is because there are more teams east of the Mississippi than teams west of the Mississippi. When considering college football, there are at least three times as many teams east of the Rockies compared to west of the Rockies. With that stated, more exposure to east coast teams seems reasonable. A similar ratio exists in Major League Baseball teams in the United States. There are eight major league teams west of the Rockies and twenty-two major league teams east of the Rockies.

With the largest sports viewing audience from all over the world, ESPN is usually the first stop by sports fans to be filled in with the latest news of their favorite teams in addition to viewing live games. Through ESPN, sports fans are able to connect to their teams from across the world that unless they were physically at the stadium would have no other way to watch. As such, there are teams for example in Major League Baseball that attract a large fan base. If ESPN covers those teams more frequently, their network will bring in more profits compared to broadcasting less appealing baseball teams that lack the larger fan base. Is the exposure of such east coast teams such as the Boston Red Sox or New York Yankees an agenda set by ESPN to increase profits? The answer could most definitely be yes. Whether or not one believes that the

ESPN east coast bias exists, ESPN benefits from providing more coverage of east coast teams, primarily through an increasing number of fans tuning in. More viewers mean a larger profit margin for ESPN.

Moreover, although each person has the power to make their own decisions, the media has a tremendous influence on what people perceive is important. When considering a newly found sports fan, watching ESPN can make a major difference in determining which sport and team will be the new fan's favorite. With an influx of exposure of professional baseball, basketball, and football, a new sports fan may be attracted to these sports instead of finding interest in a less well-covered sport, such as gymnastics or fencing.

ESPN's Sportscenter, which airs multiple times daily, features top sports plays, game highlights, and news from around the sports world. Although Sportscenter is believed to cover sports from around the nation, they truly have limited themselves greatly. They have accomplished this by limiting their scope of coverage to the major, most popular, sports throughout a particular season. For example, from the months of November through June, the majority of Sportscenter news encompasses NBA basketball and Men's NCAA basketball. Likewise, more coverage is designated to Major League Baseball in the days leading into March.

ESPN portrays prominence by highlighting sports and teams whom the network views as most important via agenda setting and therefore structure their broadcast accordingly. Not only

does ESPN show prominence through television but also through their online medium. When an online user wishes to find sports news online, they rely on ESPN.com. An example of agenda setting and prominence online is revealed when web users seek to find information on NCAA women's college basketball for example. The user begins by clicking on the NCAA basketball link from the main page, only to be transferred to the NCAA men's basketball page. In order to access NCAA women's basketball, online users have to go through three additional steps: (1) enter the main page, (2) click on more sports, (3) and scroll down to find women's basketball. Through selectively positioning sports on their online website, ESPN can guide more fans to look at certain sports over others.

Theory Overview: Interpersonal Deception Theory

Deception is defined as engaging in the practice of tricking people to label non-truth as truth. It is important to understand the nature of lies. Many people lie daily but there are different classes of lies. The theory states that we operate under a truth bias because we assume that other people are telling us the truth (Griffin, 2006).

There are three classes of deception. They include: (a) falsification, (b) concealment, and (c) equivocation. The two types that apply to the current research are concealment and equivocation. Concealment refers to not disclosing anything about a particular subject. It is still indeed lying but the fact that nothing is said makes it seem acceptable. Equivocation occurs

when one dodges an issue by not providing a direct answer, being vague, or refusing to go on record (Griffin, 2006).

Various assumptions of interpersonal deception theory surround the idea that interpersonal communication is interactive and that deception is also interactive between the receiver and sender. Lies are effective because the receiver wants to believe them. One engages in deception to accomplish a goal. It is the case that it may be beneficial for the receiver to follow the saying, “honesty may not always be the best policy,” in cases where the sender does not want to embarrass or hurt the receiver of the message in any way. Additionally, in some situations many people and organizations deceive others in order to establish or maintain a relationship.

Disassociation, an important characteristic of deception, is accomplished verbally and is used to remove responsibility. A leveler is a type of disassociation to make everyone equal, showing that the deceiver did not have a choice. Furthermore, group references suggest that others were involved in the event. Moreover, modifiers are used to downplay the significance of the situation. Finally, leakage of the truth can occur in an attempt to control behavior, arousal/physiologically, emotionally, and for reasons of cognitive factors (Griffin, 2006).

Player Bias

Similarly, along with east coast bias there have been arguments regarding an ESPN “player bias.” This bias depicts ESPN of favoring certain players and protecting these players’ reputation in lieu of negative public relations. For example, ESPN has shown bias toward players like Brett Favre, Ben Roethlisberger, LeBron James, and Coach Mike Leach.

Ben Roethlisberger

In March of 2010, Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger found himself accused of his second case of sexual assault in Georgia (his first sexual assault accusation occurring in Reno, Nevada in 2009). This alleged assault was towards a college female who claims that Roethlisberger raped her in a club in Milledgeville, Georgia (Shea, 2010).

The morning after the alleged rape, several news stations broadcast the allegations, including the NFL Network (The NFL Chick, 2010). However, ESPN delayed their broadcast for a much longer period. Strong believers in the bias of ESPN viewed ESPN’s lack of an immediate broadcast or statement as protecting Ben Roethlisberger’s image because of the network’s strong ties with Roethlisberger. These strong ties are rooted in business deals and the notion that ESPN uses Roethlisberger to grab advertisers’ attention (Hogan, 2009). The point to be made is ESPN, as the leader in sports, should have broadcast the story as it became available, especially before

other news corporations. The fact that they did not do this leaves many disappointed with ESPN and its credibility (Hogan, 2009).

The Application of Interpersonal Deception Theory on ESPN

Many people took notice that ESPN did not have notable coverage of the Ben Roethlisberger sexual assault accusations case while other media outlets covered the accusations extensively at its start. These other outlets include two of Pittsburgh's major newspapers, the Associated Press, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, and even ABC News, the parent company of ESPN.

To disassociate itself, ESPN argued that because there was no criminal action and that Roethlisberger had not publicly commented ESPN would view the matter as private and thus not consider it newsworthy. However, ESPN frequently covers stories considered to be private. Consider such coverage of the Shannon Brown case where a woman sued him for alleged sex related incident (ESPN news services, 2009), the Tony Zendejas case where he was accused of rape (Associated Press, 2009), or the O.J. Simpson case where he was accused of stealing sports memorabilia in Las Vegas (Associated Press, 2008). According to deadspin.com, "It seems pretty clear that they're being selective with their enforcement (Bennett, 2009)."

Ben Roethlisberger is a Super Bowl winning quarterback who has shined as a national celebrity. Nonetheless, his involvement in a civil lawsuit is a "matter of public record" according

to deadspin.com. If ESPN considers itself as a legitimate news organization, they should not ignore a legitimate story. By ignoring the Roethlisberger case, ESPN utilized the element of concealment to protect Roethlisberger's reputation and stay on his good side. Thus, maintaining a good working relationship with him. Furthermore, by ESPN not giving the story the attention that other news organizations provided, ESPN utilized a modifier to downplay the situation, thereby avoiding negative criticism toward Roethlisberger.

Brett Favre

Brett Favre is another famous sports figure that has been in ESPN's spotlight for two decades. Favre, a 20-year veteran of the National Football League has filled hours of broadcasts with his indecisive retirement decision. Since 2002, Brett Favre has battled with the decision of ending his career. In 2008, Favre and the Green Bay Packers experienced an unpleasant fall out resulting in Favre being traded to the New York Jets. In the summer of 2009, after playing only one year with the Jets, Favre again debated retiring. Rather than ending his career, Favre found a new team in the Minnesota Vikings. In his 2009-10 season, Favre put up the best numbers in his career. In the summer of 2010, after ending the 2009 season with a loss in the NFC championship game, Favre once again made headline news with a decision to retire. In the end, he decided to return for yet another year with the Minnesota Vikings (ESPN.com news services, 2010).

In an article by ESPN, ombudsman Le Anne Schreiber writes about ESPN's over coverage reporting on Brett Favre. The newest complaints she has received involve viewers who are offended by ESPN anchors, reporters, writers, and show hosts who make jokes about their unnecessary over-coverage of Brett Favre. Many viewers agree that the ESPN network had consciously incorporated Brett Favre into each broadcast hour, including every show following the end of each NFL season. ESPN anchors and reporters make jokes about the irrelevance of Brett Favre but yet are still open and ready to make new speculations and developments that lack content. These viewers blame ESPN for creating the hysteria over Brett Favre's decision to retire. ESPN column writer Patrick Hruby, wrote a column on "Who will save us from Favre!" which began: "We need a noble champion, a dauntless martyr, someone -- anyone -- to save us from the all-Brett Favre, all-the-time news cycle that threatens to engulf both the sports world and the entire physical universe, one replayed clip of Favre delivering a shovel pass through the snow at a time, forever radiating into deep space and beyond" (Schreiber, 2008). Schreiber concludes by explaining that it is ESPN who is the only one who can save us from too much Favre, or too much of anyone for that matter (Schreiber, 2008).

On October 7th, 2010 new allegations arose concerning Brett Favre, "leaving voice messages and sending out "Baby Brett" peen pics (inappropriate/explicit pictures) to model and former Gameday host Jenn Sterger" (The NFL Chick, 2010). Various sports media broadcast the

allegations the very same day. Even a reporter who had been at a Randy Moss press conference that same afternoon had questioned Favre about the allegations, on which Favre did not comment. ESPN, the worldwide leader in sports, had not released one word or designated one minute on air to broadcast the allegations that day. Only after a full 24 hours did ESPN take any action on the matter. Thus, ESPN can cover countless hours of news surrounding Brett Favre's future but does not allocate even a minute of news coverage the day he was accused of such inappropriate behavior? That is the question many sports analysts and ESPN sports fans are asking. The answer lies in the agenda setting theory. The fact is that ESPN was cognizant of every minute of coverage on Brett Favre. ESPN wanted to push the story and have sports fans listen and read the endless, repetitious comments of ESPN sports writers and ESPN sports broadcasters. Why would ESPN want to push Brett Favre news on their audience? There are a few speculations to why ESPN favors Brett Favre coverage. One speculation is that ESPN has had a good relationship with Favre throughout over his twenty year career and views him as an asset from their perspective. In addition, Favre has a vast fan base and thus any news concerning him would be of interest to a large number of fans, thereby pleasing sports fans. However, the over-coverage in many people's opinion suggests that ESPN did not believe that any other news stories was as important as the stories concerning Brett Favre and his decision to retire.

Moreover, the more recent news of allegations concerning Brett Favre leaving voice

messages and sending out pictures to Jenn Sterger portrays additional bias by ESPN, again protecting one of their favored athletes from negative media coverage. Any unbiased sports news station has the obligation to cover any sports related news story, regardless of whom the athlete is or the information it concerns. Whether or not one agrees with ESPN with respect to Favre related coverage, the fact is that ESPN failed at its job and did not remain objective. Many believe that this is proof of ESPN's true favorable bias toward Brett Favre (The NFL Chick, 2010).

LeBron James

In the summer of 2010 LeBron James entered into free agency. As a free agent, LeBron would decide to stay in Cleveland and try to win a championship there or to move on to a new city and have a fresh start. LeBron has been a prime media focus and subject of hype since out of middle school because of his innate basketball talent. ESPN featured numerous stories of LeBron James even a whole year leading up to LeBron James' contract ending. Some sports fans believe that ESPN showed heavy bias in their reports regarding James remaining in Cleveland and renewing for a maximum contract. There are a few reasons why some believe ESPN would have a bias for LeBron staying in Cleveland. LeBron was raised in Ohio by his mother. Later he attended high school and won multiple state championships there. These reasons contribute to form a sentimental storyline to promote James and explain why the network would like to see

James remain in Cleveland.

With the free-agency deadline looming with LeBron not having made a decision, the sports world anxiously anticipated which team the King, LeBron James, was going to select. At this point, news surrounding James and his decision had been apart of daily broadcast. On the day of the decision, ESPN teamed up with LeBron and his associates to show a one-hour, primetime, live segment on ESPN called “The Decision.” The one-hour segment created a heated debate with respect to ESPN’s bias toward James in addition to their ethical violation of paying for news. Instead of giving an hour to an athlete on their network, Leonard Shapiro of the Washington Post believes that as a news station, ESPN should have been covering the news, not producing the story itself.

To begin, we have to look at how the segment was organized. LeBron would comply to have his decision aired on ESPN as long as Jim Gray, veteran broadcaster would host the show. The network would pledge whatever advertising money bought for the show to go toward the Boys & Girls Club of America. Lastly, ESPN would produce the show in its entirety and pay for whatever costs incurred (Ohlmeyer, 2010).

Not only were fans and analysts upset over the whole ordeal brought forth by ESPN but also were in agreement over the numerous hours of ESPN exposure of LeBron James and his final destination. ESPN should be neutral and merely deliver the facts to viewers. ESPN

ombudsmen Don Ohlmeyer eloquently stated that “ESPN should never have traded inventory for access or allowed a subject to select his inquisitor,” and he notes, “Paying to play in a news environment is both dangerous and wrong. . . This was a saga of an athlete offering to unveil a two-word career choice -- South Beach -- on national television and a network blinded by the lure of stunning ratings that thought it could dance around what should be a revered journalistic tenet” (Jackson, 2010).

Shortly after “The Decision” aired live on ESPN, LeBron James’ manager Maverick Carter set up a deal where LeBron would be paid six figures to host a 3-day party in Las Vegas. Arash Markazi, a reporter for ESPNlosangeles.com, was assigned to be right by LeBron’s side covering the three-day party in Las Vegas. After the party, Markazi wrote an article named, “A Kid in King James’ Court.” He provided details to the specificity of what LeBron was wearing, who he is was with, whom he interacted with, and what he said. The article that originally was found on the Internet also made remarks about James’ immaturity at the lavish party, and him acting like “a kid.” It also quotes James’ talking about nude women, “He looks at the girls around him and says, “I wish they’d have one of these girls with no panties do that instead of the guy.” Markazi also is quoted saying, “The more you hang around James, the more you realize he’s still a child wrapped in a 6-foot-8, 250-pound frame.” One must consider whether this detailed coverage by Markazi was truly necessary in the first place.

Soon after the story was uploaded to ESPN.com, it was removed. We are told that ESPN also edited the story out from a SportsCenter segment before it was aired (Felegy, 2010). Why did it disappear? What would cause ESPN to take down the story (Craggs, 2010)? Cory Felegy of the Cleveland Sports Examiner questions why ESPN is protecting LeBron. He asks, “Has LeBron’s realm of influence grown so large that he pulls the strings on what can and cannot air on the now-bloated sports network?” Felegy stresses the fact that the problem was not the LeBron party itself that James hosted, but rather the fact that ESPN first had the article on their website and quickly removed it. It seems plausible to Felegy that a member of LeBron’s “team” found the story posted on the Internet and wanted it removed. Felegy thinks this may have been the case since ESPN has strong ties and interest to remain favorable in the eyes of LeBron James (Felegy, 2010). ESPN later released a statement by editor-in-chief Rob King stating that Markazi did “not properly identify himself as a reporter or clearly state his intentions to write a story,” King also confirmed that “ESPN.com will not be posting this story in any form.”

Circulating hype around LeBron James is an additional example of how ESPN is using its power to set its own agenda to influence the public. In addition to LeBron James making a name for himself on the court, the largest sports news organization in the world, ESPN, has also catalyzed his notoriety. LeBron, who has been a national basketball sensation since high school, has been a moneymaker for ESPN. Sport fans around the globe fantasize about LeBron and his

talents. If ESPN broadcasts more coverage on him, then more viewers will tune-in, ratings will increase, and ESPN will gain more profit. As a for-profit organization, ESPN must do whatever it can to make money and continue thriving. New threatening competitors are entering the sports world and creating a name for themselves, including Yahoo! Sports and the Fox Sports Network. ESPN must set their agenda to maximize profits to be successful. ESPN does so by focusing on LeBron James. Although advertising revenue from the one hour special, "The Decision" went to charity, ESPN nevertheless profited from the millions of viewers that tuned in.

Mike Leach

Finally, the most protested (approximately 1,700 calls or e-mails) and controversial ESPN story in 2009 was the firing of Texas Tech head coach Mike Leach. ESPN ombudsman Don Ohlmeyer writes a story of the biased treatment of Leach that occurred during the airing of ESPN's Alamo Bowl. Two perspectives were put forth concerning Leach's actions. The first portrayed Leach in a more negative light, explaining that the coach was fired because he "punished, humiliated and demeaned a player" all because the player had sustained a concussion. He punished the sophomore player by confining him to a dark shed located near the practice field. The second perspective was that the sophomore player had behavioral issues and as his coach, Leach disciplined him because of his bad attitude. Leach was then fired because it was an

excuse for Texas Tech to relinquish themselves of an expensive contract with Leach (Ohlmeyer, 2010).

During the airing of the Alamo bowl on ESPN where Texas Tech met Michigan State, the first perspective on the situation was discussed between the ESPN commentators more frequently than the latter. Where the big controversy comes in, however, is that the sophomore wideout from Texas Tech is the son of ESPN analyst Craig James who was originally supposed to call the Alamo bowl alongside ESPN play-by-play announcer Mike Patrick. James was later removed from the broadcast because of the developments of the Mike Leach 'abuse' case.

Aside from the high volume of the complaints, Ohlmeyer explains that what needs to be resolved is whether or not ESPN maintained a professional broadcast and provided its audience with a neutral/balanced stance. Many sports fans believe that ESPN had a negatively bias stance toward Mike Leach because of the fact that one of the two originally scheduled broadcasters for the game was the father of the player involved and a veteran member of the ESPN network (Ohlmeyer, 2010).

Interpersonal deception theory states that the receiver wants to believe the sender is being truthful. The reason ESPN can effectively engage in deception is because many people believe ESPN is trustworthy. ESPN has created an empire in the sports world and is viewed by many people across the globe as a reputable source for sports. ESPN hires players and coaches who are

familiar to the public to report on their areas of anecdotal expertise. ESPN is orchestrated in a professional setting where their commentators replicate legitimate news reporters from a reputable news station, including behind the scenes statistical data research. Because of this, when ESPN fails to cover a story, one might think that it is not an important issue or perhaps even erroneous and inaccurate information. Likewise, when ESPN gives countless hours of exposure to a certain subject, one assumes the notion that it is of high importance. Like any reputable source, people who watch or use any of ESPN's media services believe that ESPN is factual and telling the truth. Unfortunately, ESPN has not held up to its reputational standards in the cases seen above and have thus engaged in deception.

On the field versus off the field Reporting

When a news source is covering sports it is nearly impossible to ignore off the field (times when a player is not playing an actual game) news. Off the field issues affect team chemistry and personality conflict as well as run-ins with the law and deviant behavior. Although delayed in coverage for twenty-four hours, when Ben Roethlisberger was accused of sexual assault, ESPN covered the ongoing saga alongside other sports media. To not include coverage would be a disservice to sports fans. This disservice can be seen when ESPN removed the ESPNLosAngeles article by Arash Markazi, "A kid in King James' court." ESPN said that the official reason the article was removed from the ESPN's website was because the writer had not

identified himself as a reporter. It makes more sense that ESPN did not want to belittle the NBA as James is a legitimate status symbol for the NBA. If fewer people watch the NBA, fewer people would utilize ESPN, which would lower ESPN's revenue. Some sports fans would rather not hear any off the field individual or team activities that do not directly effect on the field performance. They would argue that such shows as Entertainment Tonight, Access Hollywood, Chelsea Lately, and the Daily 10 would be a more appropriate outlet for these scandals. The bottom line is that ESPN needs to be consistent with both off the field and on the field activities of players and should not privilege one player over another.

The Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann)

The Spiral of Silence theory concerns the growth and spread of public opinion. It is established in the theory that people feel pressured to conceal their viewpoint when holding a minority belief. According to the author of the theory, Noelle-Neumann, television is a piece of technology that tells us what everyone else is thinking (Griffin, 2006). The great communication figure John Locke established three forms of law that human beings follow, the most powerful being public opinion. Public opinion is the most stringently followed law, primarily because there is perceived safety in following public opinion law. That is because we all like to be apart of things that are liked and well known. Public opinion is always changing, which is why we always keeping our eyes and ears open to see what is going on. There are several driving forces

behind the spiral of silence. The fear of isolation is the primary force, as no one wants to be isolated from the rest of society. Group pressure is another driving force. People will conform to identify with a winner to avoid isolation. We see this play out in real life as more people will change their viewpoint at the end of the election because they do not want to be associated with a loser. There are reasons behind this drive. For one, it is good for our self-esteem to be associated with winners. ESPN plays a big role as part of mass media. People watch television to see what other people are thinking. We do not even know a small percentage of the people on earth but we know what their opinions are from the media. However, according to this theory, the media mutes the minority in the spiral of silence (Griffin, 2006).

The spiral of silence theory also outlines what determines whether one will speak out or keep quiet. Someone would tend to speak out if recognized others share the same minority opinion. Also, males, young people, and middle to upper socioeconomic class citizens are most likely to have their voices heard. On the other hand, there will be people who will never be silenced. These relentless individuals are individuals who speak out because they have nothing to lose. They regard isolation as the price they have to deal with in order to be heard. The other types of people are avant-garde individuals. These are intellectuals, reformists, people who essentially make it their business to solicit ideas that are unpopular and unknown. These people, however, usually brainstorm the ideas that only later become popular. These people tend to be

ahead of the time, ahead of the curve, and will be constantly criticized because the majority does not accept them (Griffin, 2006).

ESPN anchors and employees are among the spiral of silence. There has been no evidence or proof to believe that ESPN employees stand up and let their opinions be heard. The anchors that host Sportscenter do not publicly speak out against the stories they cover on live television, or anytime for that matter when they are working on the clock. One reason many ESPN employees have stayed quiet is because there is a lot at risk if they decide to speak out. For one, most importantly is their own job. Thus, when stories of Brett Favre and his retirement decision began after each season, ESPN writers, anchors, and radio employees had no choice but to simply cover the story, even if their assignment got to the point where *they* were getting annoyed from the amount of coverage. In this instance, it appears that the management at ESPN was out of touch with the American public and thereby the American public opinion. Rather than communicate with management about the excessive coverage, the reporters simply read the script.

Conclusion

There is no question that ESPN dominates sports entertainment news, and thus wields a lot of power and responsibility. With this power, ESPN is able to influence its audience in many ways. Less popular spectator sports including soccer, women's college and professional athletics,

and wrestling are rarely given coverage on ESPN. In contrast, ESPN popularized such sports as, Texas Hold Em' Poker, and NASCAR. Additionally, it is no accident that the Dallas Cowboys keep a large fan base, even during losing seasons. ESPN promotes the Dallas Cowboys because they perceive the Dallas Cowboys as "America's team". A short thirty-three years ago, Bob Ryan, editor-in-chief of NFL films referred to the Dallas Cowboys as "America's team" in an attempt to promote the NFL. This label stuck possibly as a result of ESPN's constant reference to that term. In fact, there are fans of thirty-one other NFL teams that would call their team, "America's team." In truth, there is no such thing as "America's team". ESPN promotes the Dallas Cowboys because they think it is good for their ratings and profitability.

Furthermore, ESPN has an audience that is interested in being entertained. When a person intentionally tunes into ESPN on television, for example, they expect the broadcast to fulfill their entertainment needs. ESPN captivates them through their professional manner and expertise, and entices them to come back. For example, imagine a person who turns on their television set and surfs through channels to find game six of the NBA basketball playoffs on ESPN. On such an occasion, there are two minutes left in the game and the score is tied. ESPN commentators are out of their seats in anticipation and entertain the audience with their thrilling comments, such as, "Wow this is so exciting; whoever is missing this is truly missing out!" The viewer sitting in their living room at home will experience a physiological arousal from the

excitement of the game, which happens to end on an exhilarating three point basket. ESPN then keeps and directs your attention by following up with a commercial preview of game seven of the series (also broadcast on their network), where one team advances and the other will go home. The viewer now has a greater chance of tuning into game seven after being 'sold' by the preview and the overall program on ESPN, than had he or she relied solely on short sport headlines for scores and upcoming schedules.

The current research has identified several incidences where ESPN has not fulfilled their network mission and failed as a reputable news source. It is difficult to say that ESPN carries no bias. Frankly, stating that would be untrue. Therefore, it is important to look at the potentially biased information from ESPN's perspective. It may be that ESPN can explain their programming (bias) simply as news that fans want to hear. If fans see their team on ESPN, they will keep watching ESPN. ESPN is merely producing content that they feel promotes their self-interest while trying to satisfy the appetite of sports fan's entertainment needs. ESPN tends to cover east coast match-ups because they think that those match-ups will attract the largest fan base.

Implications in My Conclusion

As sports preferences change in popularity, ESPN must change with the times. For example, in the past no one used to watch Texas Hold Em', however with popularity of the game, ESPN began broadcasting Texas Hold Em'. Additionally, in the natural course of daily events sporting events take place and ESPN must have newsworthy stories. ESPN will continue to expose teams and individuals in the limelight that they feel are going to produce the largest viewing audience. Moreover, if there is scandal, ESPN will report it if it is in their best interest. However, if the story negatively affects their best interest then ESPN will refrain from reporting right away or try to refrain from covering the story all together.

Limitations of My Research

My research topic covers a broad scope and being the sole researcher I could only cover a very small aspect of ESPN programming. I had to rely on focusing on major biases that have been previously written about online or in publications. Additionally, I chose to limit my research strictly to ESPN programming in the United States. I limited myself from comparing ESPN to its competitors in the sports broadcasting industry and looking at my research from an international perspective. Lastly, there is a potential for bias in the selection and conclusion of my research since I was the sole author who wrote this paper.

Future Research

Future research should address the limitations of this research paper. Moreover, future research should compare ESPN to its sports broadcasting competitors such as Yahoo Sports and Fox Sports News as well as incorporate international reporting and a cross-national study to look at coverage and bias. Future research could also look at a broader scope of sports that ESPN covers such as X-Games and Lacrosse among many others. Additionally, since the research paper has concluded that ESPN makes decisions based on their potential profitability, it would be beneficial to conduct a financial study to see how ESPN's profitability across different broadcast varies as well as the impact of sponsorship on reporting.

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