

Mixing the Messages? The Alignment of Editorial Coverage in ESPN The Magazine with ESPN's Broadcast Rights

Galen Clavio, Indiana University

Paul M. Pedersen, Indiana University (Advisor)

**Session 1: Communication
Presentation (25-minute)**

Thursday, May 31, 2007

8:00 AM - 8:25 AM

The increasing growth of sport over the last decade has led to media entities engaged in sport communication to expand, both in terms of overall coverage and in terms of venues of dissemination (Bauder, 1999; Stotlar, 2000). The parent companies of broadcast networks such as CBS, ABC, and CNN have diversified their holdings in sport media, branching out in areas such as the cell phones (Marchand, 2006), the internet, motion pictures (Hibberd, 2004), and even sport franchises themselves. One of the most talked-about diversifications was the creation of ESPN The Magazine, in a joint venture of Disney, ESPN, and the Hearst Corporation.

Disney's philosophy of cross-promotion and agenda setting has been evident for many years. The corporation subscribes to the notion of "synergy", where each product is created and marketed to enhance the profitability of other products (Goldberg, 1997). This synergy even involved Disney's sports franchises, when the corporation owned such teams as Major League Baseball's Anaheim Angels (now the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim) and the National Hockey League's Anaheim Mighty Ducks (now the Anaheim Ducks). While this philosophy appears sound from a business and management perspective, Disney runs the risk of endangering the viability of its media properties by using them in this manner. Indeed, several media observers predicted that ESPN The Magazine would be little more than a cross-promotional vehicle for the Disney properties (Lieber, 1998; Wolfley, 1998), or at the very least, a rehashing of what appeared on ESPN's cable channels (Poniewozik, 1998; Whitmire, 1998). Such opinions could lead to distrust among sport consumers, both in relation to the overall content of said media properties and their coverage of Disney's sport franchises.

The focus of this study was to investigate whether the print and photographic coverage of certain leagues in ESPN The Magazine was affected by the presence or absence of a television contract with the magazine's television partners in the ABC/ESPN family of networks. The study used the content analytic method to examine articles and photographs from every issue (N=203) published of ESPN The Magazine from its inception in March of 1998 through December of 2005. All articles, cover photographs, and photographs attached to articles that dealt with three leagues (e.g., National Basketball Association, Arena Football League, Triple Crown Racing) over specified time periods were coded. Each league was assigned two coding 'time periods', with one period covering a span of time when the league was involved in a television contract with the ABC/ESPN family of networks, and the other period covering a span of time when no television contract was present. The content was examined by four separate coders, and acceptable intercoder reliability was established by coding a random sample equaling 21% of the total sample. Of the 108 articles coded, 52 were written when the league in question did not have a television contract with the ABC/ESPN family of networks. Chi-square analysis of articles showed no statistically significant relationship between a league's television contract status and number of articles written ($X^2=2.006$, $df=2$, $p=.367$). Kendall's Tau-b showed a statistically significant negative relationship between length of story and whether the league was in a television contract ($x=.224$, $df=3$, $p<.01$).

The increasing integration of multifaceted corporations into both sport media and sport business creates an environment where hybrid messages and agenda setting are potentially more prevalent. This is relevant to sport managers due to the importance of effective sport communication to the sport industry. While corporate partnerships and ticket sales are of major importance to sport managers, the effective and reliable communication of sport messages cannot be understated. The current business climate has seen an increasing trend in large corporations' engaging in vertical integration in the sport world. For sport organizations whose parent companies also have stakes in journalistic enterprises, it is of paramount importance for the messages coming out of the journalistic side to be analyzed. This analysis helps to ensure the credibility of those messages, so that the journalistic enterprise maintains its viability in the eyes of the consumer, because the expectation of journalists is that they will be "serving the interest of the audience rather than the parent corporations of their news organizations" (Lee & Hwang, 2004, p. 189). In order to analyze how business elements are affecting journalistic coverage, this study examined the effects of ABC/ESPN's television contracts on editorial coverage in ESPN The Magazine. It is important to sport managers that sport media messages be analyzed, to ensure that the public can be informed of the sources of these messages (Cameron, Ju-Pak, & Kim, 1996), and therefore consider the messages reliable.