

**Scripting the National Basketball Association (NBA) Finals: An Analysis of Announcer Discourse and the Portrayal of Race**

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During sporting broadcasts, the media use frames to create discourse. Through embedding messages, the media are able to create a scripted telecast that ensures that only selected aspects of a communication message are salient to viewers. The media select aspects of its communication or discourse and enhance the salience of these messages (Entman, 1993). Through framing a telecast, the media build, capture and maintain audience numbers by ensuring that its communication is salient to the greatest number of viewers. Rowe (2004) notes that it is insufficient for a media company to focus solely on the sight and sound of a sporting event. Thus, framing allows a television network to create a broadcast that embeds multiple storylines into the coverage. To uncover how an event is framed by the media, the 2008 NBA Finals was analysed to uncover the framing function of the media.

The NBA Finals series features the winners of the Eastern Conference taking on the Western Conference champion in a best-of-seven-games format. This series takes place each June. This study compared announcer discourse surrounding the 2008 NBA finals based on the race of the player: black or other. This study builds and adds to the existing body of knowledge regarding media bias during sporting events (e.g., Alabarces, Tomlinson, & Young, 2001; Billings & Eastman, 2002; Larson & Rivenburgh, 1991; Tudor, 1992). While a wide body of literature around race and sport exists, this study looks at a discrete event not often studied, a National Basketball Association Finals series, to analyze and evaluate the frames employed when commenting on the racial origins of the competing players. This study sought to uncover how the concept of race was portrayed by commentators during the broadcast of the finals.

The theoretical framework that this study employs is agenda-setting. McCombs and Shaw (1972) noted that the media play an important role in the “shaping of ... reality” (p. 176). Entman (1993) comments that the amount of coverage an issue receives is indicative of its importance, which aligns with Cohen’s (1963) maxim that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers [and viewers] what to think about [original emphasis]” (p. 13). Through framing and scripting the coverage of an event, the media are able to set an agenda that its announcers will follow to ensure that its encoded discourse is correctly identified and decoded by viewers. This study seeks to uncover how the portrayals of race are framed by the American Broadcasting Corporation during the 2008 NBA Finals, which will uncover the agenda-setting function of the media.

In particular, this study breaks ground in analysing a finals-series based around the concept of ethnicity. Often, global events, such as the Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, and various sporting world cups are featured in media analyses focusing on bias of race, nationality, and gender. However, annual events, such as league finals or various sporting world cups are less often the site for analysis. Furthermore, the mediation of an audience and cultural influence of viewers may be more salient as these events are on television more often than an Olympic Games or world cups, such football/soccer. Thus, there might be a more sustained and continued mediation of viewers through broadcast discourse.

All six of the 2008 NBA Finals games featuring the Los Angeles Lakers and the Boston Celtics were included in the sample for investigation. A content analysis was conducted based on the ABC’s live telecasts of the series. Only ABC employee discourse was included in the study. Analyzing a finals series allowed for the study of frames and the change that scripts may undergo as there is at least one day between each game. Thus, the ABC can alter its series frame to cater for any changes in the series. In this study, each game was transcribed verbatim. Then, the transcription sheets were coded using a fourteen category taxonomy, which was used to record (a) the announcer uttering the phrase, (b) the race of the player, and (c) the resultant descriptor code. In addition, 20% of each game was coded by a second trained researcher to ensure inter-coder reliability, which was conducted using Holsti’s (1969) coefficient of reliability. Inter-coder reliability exceeded 86% for each game, indicating a good level of reliability among the two trained coders. The fourteen categories were: (a) athleticism, (b) appearance/looks, (c) background, (d) motivation, (e) skill, (f) history, (g) work ethos, (h) leadership, (i) mentality/composure, (j) creativity, (k) speed, (l) experience, (m) negative descriptors, and (n) positive descriptors.

Overall, there were 1519 total comments in this analysis. Of this total, 1288 or 84.79% were about black players, while the remaining 231 or 15.21% were discussing players of other races. These data were analysed using two expected scores: overall game commentary and player percentage. Thus, in the overall game commentary, the expected scores were 84.79% and 15.21%.

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In the third analysis, the expected scores were 73.33% and 26.67%, as 22 of the 30 players were black.

In the analysis at the overall percentage of commentary, which was 84.79% for black players and 15.21% for other ethnicities, there were two significant chi-square results. These were: leadership ( $df = 1, n = 80$ ) = 11.00,  $p < .001$  and negative descriptors ( $df = 1, n = 135$ ) = 82.55,  $p < .001$ . In the second analysis of the 2008 NBA finals based on ethnicity, player participation ratios were used. These ratios represented the overall participation of this series, as 22 of the 30 players were black. At these expected scores, there were eight significant chi-square results, which were: background ( $df = 1, n = 214$ ) = 17.51,  $p < .001$ ; motivation ( $df = 1, n = 51$ ) = 11.27,  $p < .001$ ; skill ( $df = 1, n = 208$ ) = 30.93,  $p < .001$ ; history ( $df = 1, n = 246$ ) = 32.61,  $p < .001$ ; leadership ( $df = 1, n = 80$ ) = 26.43,  $p < .001$ ; mentality ( $df = 1, n = 157$ ) = 8.21,  $p < .001$ ; negative descriptors ( $df = 1, n = 135$ ) = 15.143,  $p < .001$ ; and positive descriptors ( $df = 1, n = 336$ ) = 16.18,  $p < .001$ .

This study was successful in uncovering that announcer discourse overwhelmingly favored black players. The ratio of commentary between black and other players was 5.6:1. Thus, the coverage of the NBA Finals was framed by the ABC to feature black players more in the commentary. In addition, black players received an unequal distribution of comments as this group represented 73.33% of all players but received 84.79% of commentary. Therefore, the ABC set its broadcast agenda to favor black players and set an agenda through the framing of its telecast to ensure the audience decoded broadcast discourse in the manner intended (Hall, 1973; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Furthermore, black players were significantly portrayed as more effective leaders. In addition, more negative comments were provided to this group. Thus, players of other races were characterised less negatively. The results of this study underscore the fact that black athletes received far more comments than expected, based on commentary percentage, but it was found that this group was described more negatively. Thus, viewers may have been provided with a skewed view of this group, which aligns with Billings and Tambosi's (2004) notion that television networks have the ability to "culturally influence perceptions" of reality.