Scandal, Scholarship, and Subsidy: An Analysis of Intercollegiate Athletic Coverage Within the Wall Street Journal

Erianne Weight, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Coyte Cooper, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Many current scholarly investigations in intercollegiate athletics have been driven by research questions citing headlines of scandal and calls for reform as dominant features in the popular press (e.g. Cooper & Weight, 2011; Louthan, 2011; Richardson & McGlynn, 2011; Splitt, 2011; Thelin, 2011). These observation-based statements highlight the perceived focus of the media on areas of deficiency in the current operating model of intercollegiate athletics and provide support for a significant public perception problem. These articles, the associated public outcry, and related scholarly calls for reform have led to the development of the research questions pursued within this study. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence, content, and tone of intercollegiate athletic coverage within the Wall Street Journal during the 2011 calendar year in an effort to supplement current literature and understanding of the dominant themes currently in circulation. Framing as a theory of media effects will be utilized to inform the research using the media frame as an independent variable as demonstrated by previous scholars (Entman, 1993; Huang, 1996; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; & Scheufele, 1999).

Lippmann (1922) commented on the power of the media through the assertion that were it not for media coverage, events regarding public affairs would be out of reach, sight, and mind for the general public. Scholars within the disciplines of political science and communications have debated about the role of the mass media as a watchdog informing and directing political discourse; and as a source of sensationalism leading to a skeptical and ultimately unresponsive and cynical public (Bennett, Lance, & Serrin, 2005). The coverage of scandals has been widely studied by scholars in the political science and communication fields (Cameron & Park, 2011; Puglisi & Snyder, 2010; Valenzuela & Arriagada, 2011). These studies have empirically demonstrated political bias and a tendency to introduce a sense of sensationalism in coverage of political scandals. Media coverage has been a source of rich research within the field of sport management with related developed inquiry covering golf controversies (Daddario & Wigley, 2006), gender coverage and portrayal (e.g. Cunningham, 2003; Sagas, Cunningham, Wigley, & Ashley, 2004), and intercollegiate athletic sport coverage (e.g. Cooper, 2008; Pedersen, Whisenant, & Schneider, 2003) through a variety of mediums. This study will contribute to this literature through examining tone and content of intercollegiate coverage within the most widely distributed newspaper in the nation.

Qualitative and quantitative content analysis methods were utilized in order to address the specific research questions pursued within this study related to prevalence, content, and tone of intercollegiate athletic coverage. Content analysis has been widely utilized in sport management research (Clavio & Pedersen, 2007; Cooper & Miloch, 2008; Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998; Daddario & Wigley, 2006; Pedersen, Whisenant, & Schneider, 2005; Pitts & Danylcuk, 2007) and is the most appropriate form of analysis for the specific research questions pursued within this study. Strict adherence to content analysis methodology was utilized in order to maximize reliability and validity measures. Reliability was addressed through operationalizing concepts in the study protocol through precise coding sheets, trained coders, and multiple rounds of independent coding (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Inter-coder reliability measures were taken on two samples of data-analysis and in each measure the coefficient related to corrections for chance agreement was greater than .90 providing strong evidence of reliability (Andrew, Pedersen, & McEvoy, 2011; Riffe et al., 2005). Support for face validity was gathered through a review of coding sheets by a panel of experts (Folger, Hewes, & Poole, 1984). Validity was also addressed through the comprehensive sample of an entire year of coverage. Overall, the sample includes 365 front pages and sports sections of the most widely circulated newspaper in the United States in 2011 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2011) utilizing the Factiva electronic archive.

Quantitative units of analysis include word count, article frequency, and demographic measures of gender and sport-type coverage. Qualitative units of analysis include thematic coding categories covering elements of article content including values, scandals, reform, financial issues, student-athlete exploitation, student-athlete benefits, education, and several others. In addition to drawing inferences based on coded thematic content, Chi Square analysis was

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utilized in order to analyze the distribution of coverage based on independent variables. Selected findings will be discussed within the presentation.

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