Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and the Media: Using the Content Analytic Method to Examine the Print Communication Coverage Devoted to an Emerging Sport

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Over the last several decades, the sport of mixed martial arts (MMA) has transformed from its barbaric, no-holds-barred reputation to a sport that has benefitted immensely from promoters who have positioned the sport as a competitive player among the well-established sport entities such as professional boxing and wrestling (Purcell, 2007; Wertheim). Although the sport was outlawed in nearly 40 states just over a decade ago, today, MMA is considered the fastest-growing sport in the U.S. and was voted as the breakout sport during the same timeframe by a prominent national newspaper (Kimball, 2010; Maher, 2010). For example, the sport’s top-league, Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), was purchased for $2 million in 2001 and is now worth well into the billions, according to industry reports (Miller, 2008).

In spite of the tremendous growth, increased fan attraction, and monetary success of the UFC, only a few studies (e.g., Andrew, Kim, O’Neal, Greenwell, & James, 2009) have been conducted in this area. Consequently, this study—which employed a content analysis methodology—examined the coverage devoted to MMA in ESPN The Magazine. The study was grounded in two theoretical frameworks. The first was agenda-setting theory, which suggest that the mass media have the power to not only tell the public what to think about, but they are powerful enough to suggest how to think about topics and issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). Hegemony was the second theoretical constructed used to guide this investigation of the magazine’s first 13 years and it asserts that social dominance is maintained by noncoercive symbols communicated through the mass media (Patrick & Thrall, 2007). In addition, this study examined whether an agenda was being set in the coverage of MMA compared to two sport properties (i.e., X Games and NFL) that have a contractual relationship with ESPN/ABC family of networks.

For this study, intercoder reliability was established for the coding with the lowest agreements at .815 meeting the acceptable level of coder reliability (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). From the 339 issues examined, there were 992 feature stories and 6564 photographs. The findings revealed that MMA’s written coverage accounted for 17 articles, while the X Games and the NFL comprised 124 and 845 articles, respectively. In terms of pictorial coverage, there was no difference ($\eta_p^2=.00, F(3, 987)=1.06, p=.364$) in the total number of photos per article across the leagues. Other findings involved prominence (e.g., there were statistically significant differences regarding prominent and non-prominent coverage groups across the three examined sports [$\chi^2(2)=43.29, p<.001$]), gender focus (e.g., 94.2% of the photos and 93.4% of the articles were focused on males), article length and photographic size (e.g., a difference between leagues [$\chi^2(6)=49.52, p<.001$]), photographic accompaniment (e.g., no statistical difference between the leagues in terms of pictorial enhancement of articles [$\eta_p^2=.00, F(3, 987)=1.06, p=.364$]), cover pages, type (e.g., 41.8% of the photos were action shots; a statistical difference between the leagues in terms of non-violent photo content [$\chi^2(3)=139.22, p<.001$]), coverage of organizations (e.g., over 88% of the MMA coverage was devoted to the UFC), and emphasis of coverage (e.g., 64.7% of the MMA articles were focused on individuals).

Overall, although MMA received far less coverage on the pages of the publication, the results revealed instances where the magazine did not extend more favorable coverage to the sports under contract with a parent or partnered company (Clavio & Pedersen, 2007).