From Human Cockfighting to Legitimate Sport: Politicians Weigh in on MMA

Carla Santos, University of Illinois
Scott Tainsky, University of Illinois
K. Alexander Schmidt, University of Illinois
Chang Sup Shim, University of Illinois

Abstract 2012-321
Saturday, May 26, 2012
4:30 PM
20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(Salon B)

Since its inception in the early 1990s, the landscape of the mixed martial arts (MMA) industry has changed dramatically. To be sure, a decade ago MMA was regarded as a fringe player in the business of sports. However, during the 2000s MMA emerged and solidified its standing as a fixture in the sports industry with the Ultimate Fighting Championship ( UFC) growing into the sport's foremost promotion. Interestingly, while the evolution of MMA and the UFC organization has been well-documented and their character debated in mass media, the scholarly attention placed on the sport and its leading organization remains sparse and largely focused on the survey of fan motivation (Kim, Greenwell, Andrew, Lee & Mahony, 2008). While such focus on motivation has certainly contributed to furthering our understanding of the dynamics associated with the emergence of MMA, missing is an attempt to interrogate news media coverage of the sport and the UFC organization. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining news media framing of MMA and the UFC. In particular, and given the considerable debate regarding the character of the sport and its leading organization, this study focuses on the framing of political discourse concerning the evolution of MMA and the UFC. Such focus on political discourse is important when we consider that news media are often thought to influence public opinion through the way in which issues are framed (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2001; Stempel & Hargrove, 2004). Moreover, as Entman proposed, in framing an issue news media "promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (1993, p.52). News media framing of political discourse can, therefore, play a central role in winning support or opposition for particular MMA and UFC causes and policies. With this in mind, this study identifies and discusses news media framing of political discourse regarding the evolution of MMA and the UFC organization. In so doing, it contributes broadly to the sport management literature by advancing a discussion regarding the entanglement of news media, sport and contemporary political maneuvering, a topic that is particularly timely considering that political maneuvering is increasingly proposed as a key element of current patterns of reasoning in sport management literature (Cuneen, & Fink, 2006; Denham, 2011; Houlihan, 2005; Scalia, 2009).

Framing research can be traced back to its roots in communication (Entman, 1993), political science (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Schuëfele & Tewksbury, 2007) and psychology and sociology (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). In his seminal work, Frame Analysis, Goffman (1974) offered an account of how expectations are used to make sense of daily situations, suggesting that individuals organize their thoughts and experiences under a series of frames based on the individual's prior experiences and knowledge. Gamson (1992) further conceptualized framing as the organizing theme in news media narratives, and later argued that the frames mainstream media offer are used by the audiences to construct their own narratives for understanding social and political issues. Therefore, as Neuman, Just & Criglar (1992) proposed, "frames are conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information" (p.60). When journalists emphasize certain angles of an issue, they frame the issue and, some would argue, influence meaning making. Indeed, the basic underpinning of framing theory is that the world looks different to different people depending on the frames used by the writers, editors and publishers involved in what they read (Cohen, 1963; Henderson, 2004). Since newspaper articles function as a reference for sports enthusiasts, framing analysis provides the broader insight needed to identify the dynamics of sport discourse and its creation of meaning through the promotion of particular causes and policies.

With the above in mind, this study asks: What are the major political narratives highlighted in American news media regarding the evolution of MMA and the UFC organization? Do these narratives change over time and, if so, how? A framing analysis of USA Today and The New York Times covering the time period from March 1994 to February 2011 was conducted. USA Today was selected based on its established and extensive national sports section, while The New York Times was selected based on its prestige and the degree to which it approximates treatment of an issue by the national media as a whole. As such, the framing dynamics identified in these newspapers are likely to
As noted by de Vreese, Peter & Semetko (2001), frames emerge in the course of the media’s coverage of an event. This study’s 17 year time frame was, therefore, selected to allow for a comprehensive examination of the political discourse surrounding the evolution of MMA and the UFC organization as well as trace changes in the newspapers’ general framing. The timeframe follows the course of developments of MMA and the UFC’s continuing struggles to legalize the sport in jurisdictions inside and outside the United States as well as its rise in popularity. The data sample start in March 8, 1994 with the first published newspaper article on the topic by The New York Times and ends with the data collection closing date of February 4, 2011. For each year and newspaper, articles were located through the LexisNexis online database by using a search string that included the following words: “Mixed Martial Arts” or “MMA” or “Ultimate Fighting Championship” or “UFC.” This initial search garnered a total 357 newspaper articles. Each article returned by the initial search was then reviewed to assure exclusive reference to the issue of MMA and the UFC organization. Duplicates and articles that were simply an index or table of contents were eliminated. This resulted in a final total sample of 198 relevant newspaper articles identified and selected for further analysis, 110 USA Today articles and 88 New York Times articles.

Overall, our study findings suggest that there is one major frame utilized in news media coverage of political discourse regarding the evolution of MMA and the UFC organization—leveraging political capital to protect societal values. In particular, while the manner in which this frame is presented to readers does change over time, the main message of the frame remains the same throughout the coverage. Specifically, the study proposes that the evolution of MMA and the UFC organization has been framed and reframed as a succession of moral threats and reassurances that are given voice by political figures in the name of protectionism of citizenry.