Athlete Activism in Professional Sport: The Role of the Media in Mobilizing Support for Social Movements

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Sport has always been used to advance political movements and encourage specific political outcomes (Bloomfield, 2003). However, athletes are often hesitant to engage in activism for fear of alienating their teammates and fans, as well as losing lucrative endorsements (Kauffman, 2008; Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010; Cunningham & Reagan, 2011). In the case of the National Football League (NFL), where the majority of the fanbase is caucasian and approximately seventy percent of the players are African-American (Gill, 2016), athletes’ social and political activism, particularly as it relates to racial injustice, is highly controversial.

One such example is the NFL athletes’ anthem protests which started with San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick sitting on the side-line in silent protest during a pre-season game in August 2016. In the months that followed, Kaepernick’s protest gained support among his peers, with several players kneeling for the national anthem to draw attention to the issue of the disproportionate shooting of African-American males by police. Further, the protest spread to other professional sport leagues and became a major news story in the United States (US). This study examines how athletes utilize mainstream and social media to produce mobilizing and counter-mobilizing ideas and meanings in order to legitimate their activism. Since the ability of activists to bring about change depends upon framing processes, mobilizing structures, and political opportunities (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1996; Benford & Snow, 2000), we draw from the literature on framing and social movements as well as resource mobilization theory (RMT). A central premise of RMT is that social movements are influenced by the resources possessed or acquired by the activists. In addition, activists can mobilize resources only when they are able to frame the grievances and interests of aggrieved constituencies, diagnose causes, assign blame, provide solutions, and enable collective attribution processes to operate (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 150). Data will be collected for the time period August 2016 to December 2018.

Our dataset comprises: traditional print and broadcast media including articles from the four highest circulating newspapers in the United States; transcripts from the three American national broadcast networks; athlete-activists social media posts; and athletes’ press-releases. A qualitative framing analysis will be conducted to examine the collective action frames used to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists (Benford & Snow, 1988). We will then conduct a quantitative analysis to investigate the effectiveness of collective action frames by looking at their correlations with the number of new protest participants. Additionally, we will examine the difference in the use and impact of frames from interviews, press releases, and the athletes’ own social media. As the data collection and analysis for this study is ongoing, full results cannot be provided here. However, the findings of this study will shed light on an action frame’s efficacy in legitimating athletes’ activism and mobilizing support for (and counteracting opposition to) their cause. In addition, the study will provide insight into the impact and scope of athlete-activists’ mobilization strategies.