

The Politicizing of ESPN: A Content Analysis of Its Perceived Partisanship

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Abstract: Since the 2016 presidential election, there has been the perception that politics has not only taken the forefront in news, but in sports as well. After then NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee to protest social injustice, ESPN's protest coverage became a source of debate as various media outlets accused the network of exhibiting partisan coverage with a liberal bias. Sports journalism has historically suffered with issues of credibility, especially ESPN because of the blurring of the lines between information and entertainment. Through a content analysis of the sport site's Facebook comments, this study found that espn.com users were more likely to be uncivil towards other commenters and were less concerned with a perceived bias by the site. This, however, is not conclusive evidence that espn.com does not have some sort of bias but does indicate that the assumed commenters of sports sites are similar to those of hard news sites, often using its platform for their own political messaging and attacking other users who have different views.

Keywords: ESPN, Partisan, Bias, Incivility, Comments

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Since the 2016 American presidential election, politics has not only taken the forefront in news, but in the country's sports as well. Former Super Bowl quarterback Colin Kaepernick made headlines when he started protesting against racial injustice during the national anthem prior to a National Football League (NFL) preseason game (espn.com, 2016). Athletes have come together to protest in a myriad of ways that have not been as prevalent since the social activism of Muhammad Ali, Kareen Abdul-Jabbar, Tommie Smith and John Carlos in the 1960s.

Fast forward a year later to 2017 and the protest had died down a little mainly because Kaepernick was, for all essential purposes, blackballed by the league and not playing (Moore, 2018). President Donald J. Trump created a firestorm when he said during a speech in the conservative deep south that the owners should "Get that son of a bitch off the field right now, he's fired. He's Fired!" about any player that kneels (Tatum, 2017). The President's rhetoric provoked players in the third week of the season to display their dissent in various forms, whether locking arms with their teammates or taking a knee (SI Staff, 2017).

As one can imagine, because this was a national political story tied to sports, there was a media frenzy. Various news and sports outlets conducted surveys about this issue after the fact to ascertain if there was too much protest coverage. ESPN touted that Americans were interested in this as a story, but then reported 55% of those surveyed said the media was focusing too much on the story (espn.com, 2017). ESPN's reported results were similar to other major news outlets and wire services that conducted polls, including FOX News, CBS News, CNN, and ABC News/AP NORC (Agiesta, 2017; "AP-NORC Poll," 2017; Blanton, 2017; De Pinto, Backus, Khanna, & Salvanto, 2017). However, audience comments on the online story suggested that ESPN, a network devoted to sports coverage, may have a political bias. "51/39% is considered a LANDSLIDE in politics, particularly if the LEFT wins . . . of course on the new ESPN we spin EVERY bad result we disagree with," said one reader (espn.com, 2017).

ESPN conducted their own survey earlier in 2017 on the perceived political bias of its network. It found that 64% of respondents said they believed ESPN was getting it right by mixing sports news with political issues. They reported that the number of viewers who perceived a political bias by the network was unchanged since 2016 and then touted that of those who perceive a bias, 30% believe it to be a conservative one (Blyn, 2017). Other media outlets, including The Sporting News, lambasted ESPN's survey results, claiming it failed to state that 63% of those who detected a bias actually thought the network was left-leaning in its politics (McCarthy,

2017).

In recent years, credibility has suffered in journalism as the perception that news outlets were more partisan, lessening the trust the public has in the media. Sports journalism has historically suffered with issues of trustworthiness because of the blurring of the lines between information and entertainment. This study will examine whether and why those in ESPN's online audience now consider a sports network, such as ESPN, as partisan. Through a content analysis of the sport site's Facebook comments, this study found that the espn.com audience was more likely to be uncivil towards other commenters and were less concerned with a perceived bias by the site. This, however, is not conclusive evidence of espn.com lacking some sort of bias, but it does indicate that the assumed commenters on sports sites are similar to those of hard news sites, often using the platform for their own political messaging and attacking other users.

Literature Review

Sports Journalism Credibility

Research pertaining to sports journalism is an ever-growing field. Once seen as the "toy department" for not having to employ the same journalistic standards as hard news journalists, many scholars feel that for journalism be taken seriously as a profession, the same norms need to be followed by sports journalists as well (Oates & Pauly, 2007; D. Rowe, 2007). These lines are obviously blurred when you take into account a network like ESPN, who has broadcast contracts with the leagues it covers and employs former athletes alongside journalists to be reporters and announcers (Banagan, 2011). ESPN is also owned by the media conglomerate Disney and regularly promotes the company's properties on its flagship news and highlight program, SportsCenter (Oates & Pauly, 2007). These conflicts of interests and competing loyalties can make it difficult for any sport journalism outlet to appear as fair (Banagan, 2011).

Adding to the odd perception of ESPN's bias is an article one of their editors wrote in 2016, "Inside and out, ESPN dealing with changing political dynamics" (Brady, 2016). The editor acknowledged that there is a perception that ESPN as a company has moved leftward and cited certain actions by the company that may have contributed to that image. The first was in July 2015, when the company moved its ESPY Celebrity Golf Classic (a charity that raises money for cancer research for minorities) from Trump National Golf Club (owned by the Trump Organization) for diversity and inclusion reasons after then presidential nominee Donald J. Trump made

disparaging comments about Mexicans (Brady, 2016; Kludt, 2015). The second instance came the following week when ESPN awarded transgender celebrity Caitlyn Jenner the Arthur Ashe Courage Award at the ESPYS (awards ESPN uses to acknowledge athletic achievement) despite Jenner not being involved in athletics for decades (Brady, 2016).

The rise of social media is also viewed as a contributing factor for why ESPN is perceived as biased (Brady, 2016). Many of its employees, including former SportsCenter anchor Jemele Hill, have commented on politics on their twitter accounts. Hill was suspended by the network for calling President Trump a "white supremacist" in a tweet and for asking an advertiser to boycott the NFL based on Cowboys' owner Jerry Jones' stance on players taking a knee during the national anthem (Pallotta, 2017). Meanwhile the network fired former MLB pitcher and baseball analyst Curt Schilling after he posted an offensive photo about the transgender bathroom law on twitter (Bieler & Boren, 2016). Schilling had previously been suspended for tweets equating radical Muslims to Nazis, and that presidential candidate Hillary Clinton "should be buried under a jail somewhere" (Bieler & Boren, 2016). After Hill was suspended, Schilling claimed he had been fired because "ESPN is fine with liberal racism vs conservative logic" (Bieler & Boren, 2016). These actions at the very least gave ESPN the appearance that it had a liberal bias, potentially affecting its credibility with its audience.

Partisan News

The media environment has changed dramatically in the past 30 years and, along with it, there has been a growth in partisan media. Partisan news can be viewed as a political bias by the media. Biases can come in many forms, but one type is journalists' beliefs and values influencing their work (Entman, 2010; Groeling, 2013; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). A bias can also be evident in the policy or the orientation of media companies (Breed, 1955). For example, there is the perception that FOX News is politically conservative in its news coverage (Coe et al., 2008), which has only ramped up since the election of Trump.

Biases may or may not be evident in all of a media outlet's reporting, but they may be more noticeable in stories about politics. "Slanting" of the news may be more common when certain information in a news story is omitted, a pro-policy item is featured, or an anti-policy item is buried (Breed, 1955). These policies would go against the journalistic norms of impartiality, accuracy, and objectivity (Muller, 2015). Partisan news would imply that not only have the news outlets omitted things from their stories; they may have also distorted the facts

or are vehicles for propaganda, such as Breitbart News Network (Groeling, 2013; Rosenstiel, 2016). Oftentimes, partisan media also use fewer sources in crafting stories, indicating another concern about reporting methods (Mitchell, Gottfried, Stocking, Matsa, & Grieco, 2017).

A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that 75% of people from 38 countries believe that it is never acceptable for a news organization to favor one political party over another in its reporting (Mitchell, Simmons, Matsa, & Silver, 2018). If ESPN's audience perceives a bias in its reporting, it could reinforce the notion that it is not a credible source for sports news. To address this, this study seeks to examine the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does ESPN's online audience perceive the network has a political bias in their reporting?

RQ2: If the members of the audience perceive ESPN as having a bias, do those members then indicate that the bias is a liberal one?

RQ3: If an online audience member perceived a bias by ESPN, does that member also divulge their own political affiliation?

Incivility

Civil discourse is considered a democratic ideal. The lofty exchange of ideas with our fellow citizens could not exist, however, without some degree of respect between one another (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Herbst, 2010; Papacharissi, 2004; Sapiro, 1999). Incivility has always existed in the realm of public discourse, but with the advent of technology there are copious spaces where people can now be uncivil (Coe et al., 2014). Incivility is usually categorized as rude language, but it carries a disrespectful tone and can hamper others from feeling free to discuss their ideas (Prochazka, Weber, & Schweiger, 2018).

Researchers have analyzed incivility in the online political arena and in articles posted on newspapers' websites (Coe et al., 2014). Incivility can take many forms, including vulgar language, racial slurs, and name calling directed towards others (Prochazka et al., 2018). The negative tone of a comment is also a key indicator of incivility (Sydnor, 2018).

The most common way for the audience to participate in journalism is by leaving comments for a story on a website (Hille & Bakker, 2014). As of 2014, over 90% of news websites employed this feature (Ksiazek, 2016; Stroud, Scacco, & Curry, 2014). This began on the media platform itself, but later some news sites, such as espn.com, utilized third-party plugins, such as Facebook, for their embedded user commentary (Hille & Bakker, 2014). Many sites started to do this after being inundated with vitriol in reader comments in the hopes that people being less anonymous would make them more civil towards others in the public sphere (Bruckner & Schweiger, 2017; Santana, 2014). Some news sites, such as Reuters and National Public Radio, have shut down their comment sections completely because of concerns over incivility (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017).

Previous studies have shown that in user comments, comments that are not anonymous are generally civil, while those that are anonymous are uncivil (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; I. Rowe, 2014; Santana, 2014). The theory is that the non-anonymous comments lends themselves to greater accountability on the part of the user (I. Rowe, 2014). Facebook however employs a real-name policy in its plugin. Despite this, as of 2013, half the public found Facebook to be uncivil, while 34% found it civil (Shandwick, Tate, & KRC Research, 2013). The Pew Research Center in 2014 also found that 73% of adult internet users have seen someone being harassed online and 40% had experienced incivility directly (Duggan, 2014). Of those who experience harassment directly, 66% said it happened on social media.

Scholars also found that highly contentious topics, such as abortion, created greater instances of incivility (Chen & Lu, 2017; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; I. Rowe, 2014). Incivility then depends on context and the cues from fellow commenters (Sydnor, 2018). User comments accompanying online content can also affect the perception of it (Houston, J. Hansen, & S. Nisbett, 2011). For example, when partisan comments are present, the perceived media bias of an article is stronger. This leads to the following hypotheses and research questions:

H1: Incivility will be present in the majority of Facebook comments on ESPN's stories associated with a contentious topic

RQ4: How many comments overall were negative in tone?

RQ5: How often did ESPN's online audience display incivility in their comments?

RQ6: What percentage of commenters responded to another commenter instead of the article itself?

H2: Response comments are more likely to be disparaging than original comments.

Method

The researcher for this study content-analyzed Facebook comments of stories that appeared on espn.com from 2016-2017 to ascertain whether ESPN's online audience perceives network bias. A content analysis is an appropriate method for a systematic and objective quantitative analysis of the data and can be applied to many different forms of communication (Neuendorf, 2001).

Sampling

An inquiry through the internet search engine google.com was completed with the terms "protest," "anthem," and "espn.com" from 2016-2017. The search time frame included from August 26, 2016, when National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick was first recognized for protesting racial injustice in America, up until the final week after President Trump demanded athletes be fired for protesting the anthem, September 29, 2017 (Seifert, 2017a; Yeboah, 2016)]. These search terms were employed, as it was more likely that these stories were highly controversial and would garner the most attention from the audience.

One story for each week was chosen through random sampling, and certain weeks were skipped because there were no stories that matched the search parameters. The sample includes a total of 45 stories. The first ten Facebook comments to the story were analyzed, as those were the comments most likely to be seen and commented on by an average espn.com reader. Users must have a Facebook account to be able to comment on stories posted to espn.com. They are made aware before they post on espn.com that the photo and other personal information that they make public on Facebook will appear with the user's comment and could be used on ESPN's media platforms (espn.com, 2017).

News organizations use Facebook for the comments sections of their web sites as a way to account for its users and have them be identifiable (I. Rowe, 2014). Facebook has the most users on social media with a last count of more than 2.7 billion registered accounts (Statista.com, 2020). For American adults who are online, 79% use Facebook compared to 24% who use Twitter (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). ESPN has garnered 18 million likes on Facebook, as compared to 9.2 million for Fox Sports and 3.7 million for its other competitor, CBS Sports ("CBS Sports - Facebook Search," 2017). The top three stories on "anthem" and "protest" were shared

more than 100,000 times each on Facebook and had a combined 1,713 comments.¹

Codebook

The codebook includes the following variables: whether espn.com's audience perceives the network to have a political bias and, if so, is it a liberal one, whether those commenters from that audience divulge their own political affiliations, whether the comments are uncivil, what the overall tone of the comment is and if they are in response to a previous comment as opposed to an original one by a user. Bias is defined as the Facebook user's stated perception that ESPN has a specific ideological view that influences how stories are written for espn.com; the consequence of that view will be that the story will be construed as not being fair and accurate by the audience posted to espn.com.

Incivility was measured through four variables: vulgarity, racial slurs or stereotyping, yelling, and disparagement. Vulgarity includes misspelled profane words such as "f*ck" or "dam" or the usage of symbols to display ire "%\$*" and words that are not considered proper e.g. "pissed" or "screw you." Racial slurs or stereotyping included examples such as "knee bros" or use of the term "racist." Yelling in comments was defined as words that appeared in ALL CAPS in any of the comments, but did not include such terms as ESPN, CNN, NFL, etc. Disparaging comments included sarcasm and name calling. Name calling included such examples as "TURD," "Krapineck," "loser", "dummy" etc.

Political affiliation falls in the following categories: liberal, conservative, or unable to tell from the comment. Response comments were operationalized, as the number of Facebook users who responded to the sampled comment by either specifically starting the comment with another user's name or by using such phrases as "dude, you don't know" or "I understand your view, but..." and not directly to the story itself.

Coding

The unit of analysis is a comment to stories on espn.com. Coding was conducted by two journalism students at The University of Texas at Austin in the United States. The coders underwent training and pretests were conducted on 10% of the comments sampled. Two rounds of pretests were done to ensure inter-coder reliability. The analysis achieved inter-coder reliability of 84% to 100% on 21 out of the 24 variables. The other

1 The top three stories were: "NFL players, coaches, owners locked arms, kneel during national anthems," "President Trump criticizes NFL player protests, says fans should exit stadiums," and "Source: Fans upset by protest can get Sunday ticket refunds," (ESPN.com, 2017; Rovell, 2017; Seifert, 2017b).

three variables were at 68.4%.²

Results

Bias

RQ1 asked to what extent ESPN's online audience perceived that ESPN has a bias in its reporting. Surprisingly, of the 450 comments analyzed, only 11 of the comments indicated that ESPN had a bias. Examples of comments that questioned ESPN's reporting included "really ESPN??? I guess we now to have a box score for how many times a player protested the American flag and police now. Way to promote this," and "...I won't be turning the channel to ESPN either. They are deleted from my channel lineup. Supporting this type of hatred towards police is anti-American and any network that supports this jerk is deleted." Overall, very few members of espn.com's online audience sampled in this study remarked on there being a bias by the network and only one comment used the word "bias," referring specifically to another commenter and not to espn.com.

RQ2 addressed whether those commenters who did perceive ESPN as having a bias thought that the bias was liberal. Out of the 11 commenters who saw a bias, four perceived the bias as being liberal. "Would you please stop posting and giving coverage to these utter jackasses. I realize ESPN has a fairly hard left bent, but if you ignored these Jackasses and the press coverage stopped it wouldn't be an issue," said one commenter. Another comment:

your paid to play football, an entertainment sport, not a platform for your personal disagreements. And ESPN, stop glorifying these people that are doing this. You basically had a hand in the shaming of Tim Tebow just because he knelt in prayer before a game. Your becoming more political and less of a sports outlet.

The rest of the comments saw a bias, but the commenter did not explicitly say if the bias of the network was a liberal or conservative one.

RQ3 analyzed if one could tell the political inclination of the commenters who perceived a bias. Less than half who detected a bias were deemed conservative in their political ideology. An example of a conservative comment would be:

of course the majority of ESPN libtards want to point to some sort of racism which is absolutely ridiculous considering what % of NFL players are black and how desperate teams are to find a true starting QB... and SheHe Breanna isn't doing anything brave but sounding off a few cliches that are being pushed by the WNBA

² The three variables at 68.4% were devices employed, disparaging comments, and tone.

and leftist propagandist ESPN. What you won't see getting pushed by ESPN or WNBA is a traditional Straight Christian Women.

RQ4 addressed how many comments were negative in tone. A total of 50.7% of the comments were coded as negative, while 49.3% were coded as neutral, and .7% as positive. For instance, "he is not standing up for anything. He is an ignorant, disrespectful human being who has just shown the world that he just doesn't get it through his money and we read about him getting arrested or that he is bankrupt... he will never get it" was coded as negative. These types of comments overlapped with the coding in the incivility category, and led us to the following research questions.

Incivility

RQ5 discussed the extent to which ESPN's online audience displayed incivility in their comments. The audience employed uncivil comments a total of 288 times, with the disparagement category receiving the most (n=210) followed by racial slurs (n=42), yelling (n=36), and vulgarity (n=26) (Figure 1). Out of the 450 comments, only .7% were positive. An

example of a positive comment (despite it employing a yelling device), "Steven Shaw - Well said. People need to learn to respect BOTH sides of an issue like this."

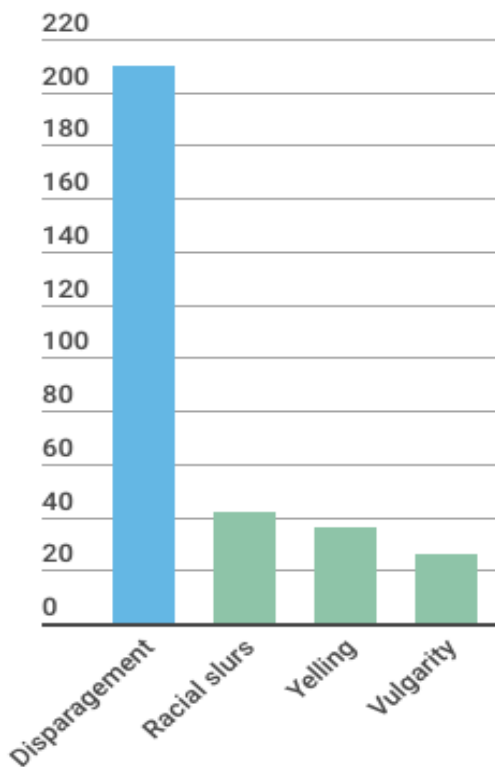


Figure 1. Number of times ESPN's online audience employed the following uncivil devices in their comments.

Some examples of disparaging comments were "good bye fool" and "...these losers want to blame Goodell for the viewership being down. I'm sure it is just a coincidence that it happened when these spoiled brats started this crap." Sometimes the disparaging comments overlapped with those that had racial slurs, "your right blacks are killing themselves with guns... All kinds...Not a protest anywhere... Let a rare occurrence of a white cop killing a black.. Niggaz burning the city down.. Gtfoh." Commenters who yelled equaled 8% of the uncivil comments:

better NOW for minorities than they have EVER been in this country. But equality has not been achieved sir! I don't know ANY Black people that would agree to that sir. And you say a great deal would... NO WAY sir... No way. Again... Things are better now more so than ever. But for you to use that language shows the disconnect between our experience and the general public's perspective.

While vulgarity only equaled 5.8% of the uncivil comments it included remarks such as these, "...and your could be DUMBF*CK" and "...so ALS doesn't affect people's lives?... Douche." In general, this type of comments suggest that users were more concerned with what another commenter said instead of the story itself on espn.com and leads to the next research question.

RQ6 ascertained what percentage of commenters were actually responding to another commenter instead of the story itself. Results showed that about two-thirds of commenters (68.2%) responded to another's comment like the following:

Howard Robinson I believe standing and paying respect to national anthem and flag means appreciating and honoring those who served and made sacrifices towards the well being of this country. For Kaepernick to sit at the bench to protest against police brutality against minorities were not well thought out way. He should've made a donation towards charities that are for BMM in my opinion.

H2 hypothesized whether response comments were more likely to be disparaging than original comments. In the posts responding to another commenter, 51.1% were disparaging. In comparison, 37.1% of original comments were disparaging. In other words, response comments were more likely to be disparaging than original comments (chi-square = 7.768, d.f. = 1, $p < .01$). For example, "what an insanely stupid thing to say. Hard to believe people can believe the garbage that spews out of their own mouth. You generalizing athletes as if they can't do anything but play sports is absolutely comically ignorant. George read a book buddy your living in Hitler/ dictator time with those sweeping inaccurate generalizations" and "Thomas Henry Why is that? Show us how smart you are.

Tell us what you know about the Constitution that Liberals don't."

Overall, it was apparent that ESPN's online audience utilized various devices to display incivility in their comments. Thus H1, the hypothesis that incivility would be displayed in a majority of comments because there was a contentious topic, was supported. H2 was also supported as 51.1% of response comments were disparaging as opposed to only 37.1% in original comments.

Table 1

Cross Tabulation of Those who Used Disparaging Remarks in a Comment (Original versus Response Comments)

	Not Disparaging	Disparaging	Total
Original Comment	62.9%	37.1%	100%
Response Comment	48.9%	51.1%	100%

Note. N=450, chi square = 7.768, d.f. = 1, p < .05.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to examine if readers of espn.com felt that the sports site exhibits a liberal bias. Through a content analysis of 450 Facebook comments of espn.com stories, this study surprisingly found that the majority did not indicate that ESPN had a bias. This comes despite various news outlets berating the network over its coverage and its own editor critiquing the network's appearance as having moved to the left (Brady, 2016; McCarthy, 2017). Findings indicated that most commenters were instead reacting to what another audience member said. About two-thirds of commenters were ranting towards another poster and comments about the article seemed to be secondary. One user said:

Mark C. McMullen I see you live in North Dakota so you get a pass for your vaguely racist rant. Now that you're 'retired' and wasting words unnecessarily gloating about it like a mature, well-adjusted individual, maybe you should spent some time traveling the world so your p.o.v. isn't so narrow-minded and geographically isolated.

This type of comment displays why about half the comments were considered negative in tone, while a miniscule

amount were coded as positive.

Of the total comments, 64% were uncivil and the majority of those comments were disparaging (Figure 1). Disparaging comments included sarcasm and name calling. Comments responding to others were also more likely to be disparaging than those that were an original comment (Table 1). This indicates a bigger issue with incivility in topics regarding politics or other hot-button issues in the online public sphere than with a journalistic bias by espn.com. It would also validate previous findings that contentious topics make people more uncivil, as opposed to the notion that they are more civil when they are not anonymous (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; I. Rowe, 2014; Santana, 2014).

The quality of online discussions about politics is at stake here. What does it also say when people get into heated discussions on sports websites about politics? The internet has changed how many different opinions we think there are, we can now see what others think, and we do not like it (Shirky, 2013). These platforms, with no system to moderate comments, essentially result in the wild west of discussion with only outlaws. This also raises concerns if the perceived media bias of an article is stronger when there are partisan comments (Houston et al., 2011). Add to that a growing incivility, then what is the impetus for journalism sites to keep open these digital public spheres under articles?

Lately, the media in general has suffered from the appearance of being biased, thanks in part to an increase in partisan news (Groeling, 2013). It has also caused other media outlets to lash out and even accuse those in the sports media of having a political bias (McCarthy, 2017). When a bias is discerned by the public, that often leads to that media entity being viewed as having a lack of credibility (Houston et al., 2011; Lee, 2012). Many times, partisan media also uses less sources in crafting its stories, indicating another concern about its reporting methods (Mitchell et al., 2017). These are criticisms that sports media outlets like ESPN do not need more of, as they are already accused of blurring the lines between journalism and entertainment. They also have several anchors and sports commentators that do not censor their personal political opinions. ESPN may take actions and suspend or fire these journalists after the incidents occur (Bieler & Boren, 2016; Pallotta, 2017), but the damage to the network's credibility is apparent.

The media today compete with a burgeoning assortment of web products, instantaneous reporting of information, and, in the words of Australian media executive Cameron O'Reilly, "promiscuous" consumers

(Singer, 2010, p. 176). This competition, coupled with the fact that many journalism outfits are owned by media conglomerates, makes it seem as though the focus is on the bottom line and not credibility (Richards, 2010). The most influential factor in setting the agenda of an organization is the management. If the perception of a media outlet, in this case ESPN, is that there is a bias, even if there is none in actuality, that should be a concern for that organization. The goal should be that unless it is commentary, journalists should not be advocating a position on controversial issues (Richards, 2010). Journalists' credibility is often tied to their employer. To the general public, what they are reporting is a reflection of the tenets of that employer and not just to the reporters themselves (Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos, 2007). There is a cumulative effect when some journalists in an organization are seen only for their political views: these personal views inadvertently become the brand of the network. It leads to a lack of trust and, ultimately, to the potential downfall of the media organization and the media in general.

Despite this study's attempt to advance research on the slanting of reporting by a sports journalism website, there were some limitations. There was an inability to be able to sample every reader comment from every story on espn.com. Only the first ten comments were chosen, as those were the comments most likely to be seen and commented to by an average espn.com reader for stories with the search terms "protest," "anthem, and "espn.com" from 2016-2017.

Ideas for future research would comprise sampling more stories and also surveying the readers of ESPN the magazine and ESPN's broadcast viewers to see if they perceive a bias from the company. Also looking for biases in the reporting of the articles themselves would prove useful as an indication that the network is non-partisan. Another area for forthcoming research could include a critical cultural article on the readers' perceptions of the reporting by the network on Colin Kaepernick and an analysis of uncivil comments that readers directed to the quarterback himself.

This exploratory analysis has tried to address valuable questions pertaining to the credibility of the reporting of ESPN. It has also raised new ones regarding the incivility of reader comments on politics in what is generally considered non-political arenas. This, however, is not conclusive evidence that espn.com did not have some sort of bias during this time. It does indicate that the assumed commenters of sports sites are similar to those of hard news sites, often using the platform for their own political messaging and attacking other users who have different views.

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