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Mediating the Bubble: ESPN's SportsCenter's Coverage of the NCAA men's Basketball Bubble

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MEDIATING THE BUBBLE: ESPN'S SPORTSCENTER AND COVERAGE OF THE NCAA
MEN'S BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT

by

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B.A., Southern Illinois University, 1988

M.S., Southern Illinois University, 2007

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Mass Communication and Media Arts
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

MEDIATING THE BUBBLE: ESPN'S SPORTSCENTER AND COVERAGE OF THE
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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial

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for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of Mass Communications and Media Arts

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Scott Lambert, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Mass Communications and Media Arts presented on October 25 at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: MEDIATING THE BUBBLE: ESPN'S SPORTSCENTER AND COVERAGE OF THE NCAA MEN'S BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. William Babcock

This dissertation examines ESPN's SportsCenter's coverage of the NCAA men's basketball tournament bubble. The dissertation examines the differences in coverage between average teams from the six major NCAA Division I men's basketball conferences and teams from the other 25 conferences. The dissertation examines SportsCenter's coverage from an effects method, questioning whether SportsCenter sets the agenda for other news media in terms of national sports coverage, in this case coverage of the NCAA men's basketball tournament bubble. The dissertation also takes an effects method in terms of framing, examining the narratives SportsCenter uses to describe tournament teams and the attributes that SportsCenter chooses to use depending on the conference affiliation of the team.

Finally, the dissertation examines SportsCenter's coverage in terms of political economy, concentrating on ESPN's financial ties to the six major conferences and the importance of maintaining a status quo in terms of promoting the superiority of teams from the six conferences compared to teams from the other conferences.

Combining the three approaches provides evidence that SportsCenter does tilt its coverage in favor of teams from the six major conferences in order to promote its financial priorities.

SportsCenter works to emphasize a perception of superiority among average teams from the six major conferences in order to ensure that its top teams are easily and often exposed to ESPN's coverage and to maintain consistent ratings.

DEDICATION

To Jamey, without your support, this wouldn't have been possible. All my love. Thanks.

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First, thanks to my wife Jamey, who made all of this possible. I would also like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. William Babcock for his help and his guidance, and Bill Freivogel for his ability to always find common ground with people, I learned a lot from him.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The success of Butler University and Virginia Commonwealth University in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's national men's basketball tournament during the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 seasons brought forth claims of parity in men's basketball from national sports media. Both schools advanced to the NCAA Final Four in the 2010-2011 season, and Butler University qualified for the national championship game in both 2009-2010 and 2010-2011. The success of the two schools from non-traditional power basketball conferences reinforced the argument that the NCAA men's basketball tournament is fair.

But to say the NCAA men's basketball tournament selection process is fair is not true (Litos, 2007). Despite the narrative of parity arriving in the NCAA, the playing field tilts considerably in favor of six specific conferences. The Atlantic Coast Conference, the Big Ten Conference, the Big East Conference, the Big 12 Conference, the Southeastern Conference and the Pac-12 Conference have considerable advantages over teams from the other 25 NCAA Division I men's basketball conferences (B. J. Coleman, DuMond, & Lynch, 2010).

One advantage is tradition. The powerhouses play in these conferences. Universities with programs that have won multiple national titles – universities such as the University of North Carolina, the University of Kansas, the University of California at Los Angeles, Syracuse University, Michigan State University, Duke, and Ohio State University – play in these conferences. These programs have won national titles and garnered attention through the years as national powerhouses. These universities make the six major conferences powerful.

At the same time, these conferences also are filled with teams such as Wake Forest University, the University of Illinois, Virginia Tech University, Northwestern University, Rutgers University, Oregon State University and Baylor University. These universities all have large alumni bases, large fan bases and traditions of being good at times.

These universities also benefit from the success of the major powerhouses that reside in their conferences. The college basketball teams from these universities enjoy the benefits of constant media exposure and a perception that their league is strong because the top teams in the league are strong. These universities also have the advantage of television.

Television rights packages in basketball provide billions of dollars for the coffers of the NCAA. The NCAA men's college basketball tournament is the NCAA's largest income source. The NCAA has no control over college football's television revenue, so basketball is important for the institution. The basketball revenue from television represents 80 percent of the NCAA's operating income (NCAA, 2011). Keeping the six conferences that control the majority of college football's television revenues satisfied is important to the NCAA. The six conferences that control the revenue in football receive more than 60 percent of the NCAA men's basketball tournament's television rights disbursements (NCAA, 2011). They receive the vast majority of airtime and an even greater amount of national coverage from the press.

The most powerful force in sports media is ESPN. ESPN's main sports journalism program, SportsCenter, reaches more than 90 million sports fans a month, and athletes, coaches and sports journalists watch it. SportsCenter concentrates its college basketball coverage on the teams from the top six conferences ("ESPN Corporate Information," 2010), and ESPN concentrates its coverage and pays millions of dollars in television rights fees to these six conferences, which makes it difficult for ESPN to avoid conflict-of-interest questions.

This dissertation examines that conflict of interest and questions if this leads to a bias in coverage. The overall question this dissertation asks is this: Does ESPN, through its major sports journalism vehicle SportsCenter, contribute to an unfair advantage for teams from the six major NCAA Division I men's college basketball conferences as compared to teams from the 25 other NCAA Division I college basketball conferences?

The work questions whether there is a difference in coverage by ESPN's main sports news entity, SportsCenter, of teams from six specific conferences compared to teams from the other 25 conferences. It examines how ESPN's major sports news show, SportsCenter, selects narratives about the final few teams that may qualify for the NCAA Tournament as at-large teams. This narrative enhances viewers' perceptions of the teams from the six major conferences. This research is not focused on traditional powers (schools such as Duke University, the University of Kentucky, Ohio State University or the University of North Carolina). This research concentrates on how media – specifically, ESPN and its sports journalism news operation, SportsCenter – approach the mid-level teams from the six major conferences, and it compares the narratives SportsCenter creates with those schools and with schools that come from the other 25 conferences in NCAA men's Division I basketball.

Media play a role in influencing fans – and, possibly the committee via indirect means – through a number of methods. Media set the agenda in discussion of what teams should be considered as viable candidates to qualify for the tournament. The research examines SportsCenter's role in setting an intermedia agenda-setting effect from the show to newspapers across the United States. One section studies the role SportsCenter plays in setting a national agenda. The research in that section questions whether SportsCenter has the ability to play a role as a national agenda-setter when it comes to national sports news. If even a small connection can

be found, it becomes important to examine the role SportsCenter plays in framing its coverage. Because SportsCenter has a monetary interest in many different sports, including college basketball, it is important to examine how SportsCenter frames stories and sets up narratives concerning college basketball. These narratives and frames play a role in how people view teams and conferences overall. By emphasizing or ignoring specific characteristics of a story, SportsCenter could influence viewers' perceptions – not just about individual teams but, over a period of time, about the entire process of selecting what teams are worthy of qualifying for the NCAA Tournament. This is important because it relates to the question of fairness in selection into the NCAA Tournament.

The research examines how SportsCenter frames discussions about which teams should be selected as the final teams in the NCAA Tournament. The research examines how ESPN frames salience in terms of specific attributes that the NCAA Tournament committee uses to select teams to place more importance, or less importance, on those factors. Second, the research examines if SportsCenter frames a bias into its discussion of NCAA “bubble” teams. If SportsCenter emphasizes specific teams from certain conferences, viewers may be persuaded to view these teams more favorably.

Finally, the research examines ESPN's financial motives in establishing a hierarchy of power in the NCAA. That is accomplished by examining the history of televised college sports and the money involved in covering those sports. The research examines how the NCAA distributes the billions of dollars it receives in NCAA Television rights packages. The research examines the role that money, through television rights, plays in determining which programs and conferences become national powers, and which programs and conferences remain relegated to regional success. The research compares television ratings between major conferences and the

others, then compares those ratings in the NCAA Tournament. At the same time, the research examines how those ratings are interpreted by newspaper reporters who follow NCAA men's basketball. The research examines the impact television and television rights play on basketball conferences, then examines what happens when the existing power structure is threatened by the success of a university such as Butler. Varying story lines must be followed to maintain the traditional power structures when universities such as Butler succeed.

This research is of interest for three reasons. First, college sports are a multibillion-dollar venture that has garnered the interest of Congress throughout the years, both for antitrust issues and during instances when programs cheat to excel. Second, this dissertation examines ESPN, a network that operates with an inherent conflict of interest, covering teams as a journalistic entity on one hand while marketing teams in a way that draws large audiences on the other. Finally, this study examines the construct of big-time college basketball, questioning how teams and conferences become known as powerhouses, and television's role in these determinations.

It also is important when questioning the effect of television on college sports, as well as the effect of televised sports journalism on college sports. This research is much less about sports and the NCAA Tournament than it is about how media affect the perception of those involved in sports. This research examines how television exposure leads to a national reputation for some teams, but a lack of exposure leads to national snubs in other cases.

CHAPTER2

LITERATURE REVIEW

AGENDA-SETTING

Agenda-setting, like priming and framing, begins with Walter Lippmann, who mentioned the “pictures in our heads” as a way to describe how an audience interprets news and media content (Lippmann, 1997). The agenda-setting process occurs with the transfer of salience from the media’s agenda to the public’s agenda (McCombs, 2005) – or, as Bernard C. Cohen said, “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963). By keeping a story in the news, media organizations may not affect the way the audience reacts to the story, but they can affect the importance the audience places on the story (Rogers & Dearing, 1993). The original 1972 Chapel Hill study by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw focused on a political election (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In that study, the authors examined the 1968 presidential election and discovered there is a transfer of salience from the media coverage of the presidential race to audience opinion of what was deemed important in the race.

James Dearing wrote that the media reflect reality in two ways: by filtering and shaping it, and by concentrating on specific issues to place more prominence on those issues and lead the audience into perceiving those issues as more salient than others (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

Agenda-setting studies expanded into how salience is scrutinized. Media do not just concentrate on one specific story. Topics compete with each other, and the public often associates the most important news topics as those that receive the most media attention (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). At the opposite end of the spectrum, the audience gives topics

that received less media attention less salience (Wanta & Wu, 1992). The number of issues the public can deem important is limited. The same is true for the press (M. McCombs, 1997). Time lag also is important, and the more time spent on a story, the greater salience the story has (Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002). In addition, major television networks can influence salience in the span of one week by placing a great amount of salience on that particular story (Wanta & Hu, 1994).

As agenda-setting theory advanced, scholars identified four phases of agenda-setting. The first examined the transfer of salience; the second examined attribute salience; the third examined candidate images and political interest as alternate agendas; and the fourth examined who sets the media's agenda (M. E. McCombs, 1992). The fourth phase, intermedia agenda-setting, draws its roots from both agenda-setting and gatekeeping (Meraz, 2009). McCombs wrote that, in the 1980s, scholars started asking who set the media's agenda, and studies about intermedia agenda-setting became prevalent (M. McCombs, 2005). Scholars asked in the 1980s, "Who sets the media's agenda?" (M. E. McCombs, 1992) While answering the question, they discovered that media routine plays a large role in setting the news agenda (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001). Part of that routine includes observing what others in the business are doing. McCombs wrote, "Journalists routinely look over their shoulders to validate their sense of news by observing the work of their colleagues, especially the work of elite members of the press" (M. McCombs, 2005). Because journalists spend so much time observing what others in their business are reporting, the news becomes homogenized (M. McCombs, 2005). This phenomenon goes back to the 1950s and Walter Breed's (Breed, 1955) study that showed an arterial flow from major newspapers to others that leads to a homogenized news flow (Breed, 1955).

Following Breed's path, scholars began an examination of gatekeeping studies in relation to intermedia agenda-setting. Shoemaker et al. defined gatekeeping as the process in which many potential news images are shaped and reduced into a few news images, or the process in which billions of messages are shrunk to hundreds of messages per day (Shoemaker et al., 2001).

David Maning White began gatekeeping analysis of media in a 1950 study that examined Mr. Gates, a copy editor (White, 1950). He waited until after Mr. Gates finished editing the daily edition of the newspaper, then looked over the material Mr. Gates hadn't chosen for the next day's paper. Through interviews, White formed an idea of what went through Mr. Gates' mind when making his decision to use or not use a story. White found that factors such as bad writing, timing, and subjective elements such as personal, religious or political beliefs played into what was put into – and left out – of the paper every day (White, 1950).

More studies followed. In 1986, Lucig Danielian and Stephen Reese examined how the New York Times coverage of the cocaine issue affected other news coverage (Danielian & Reese, Stephen D, 1989). They found that smaller newspapers take their cues from the elite newspapers such as the New York Times (Danielian & Reese, Stephen D, 1989). Thomas Boyle examined how newspapers affected television coverage of the 1996 presidential election (Boyle, 2001), and found that major television networks coverage was similar to that of the New York Times (Boyle, 2001). Others studies worked to find links in transfer of salience from traditional news media to new media forms (M. McCombs & Funk, 2011), and from new media outlets to traditional media (Meraz, 2009).

Agenda-setting often is used to examine political and policy news agendas. It also can be used to examine other forms of news. McCombs wrote in 2005 that agenda-setting studies should advance to arenas outside of political discourse and cited examples of instances where scholars

have used agenda-setting to examine media in other forms, including sports (M. McCombs, 2005).

John Fortunato has done a number of agenda-setting studies within the realm of sports. In 2000, Fortunato examined how public relations experts working for the NBA helped to shape the media's agenda of the NBA (Fortunato, 2000). In 2008, Fortunato used the agenda-setting model to examine how the NFL's flexible schedule places games that are more competitive on television on Sunday nights (Fortunato, 2008). An intermedia agenda-setting study that examines ESPN's effect on regional newspapers easily fits in this field of research. Starting with the assumption that ESPN's SportsCenter acts as the elite source for national sports news, a natural approach would be to study the effect that source has on regional newspapers in terms of setting the agenda for coverage of the NCAA men's basketball tournament.

FRAMING

Agenda-setting, especially second level agenda-setting, has a relationship with framing, although the two are different means of examining media artifacts (Dietram A Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Second level agenda-setting relies on attribute salience, making certain aspects of a story more prominent and easier for an individual to recall those attributes (Dietram A Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Framing, according to Scheufele, assumes that subtle changes in wording may affect how the audience interprets information presented to them (Dietram A Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). While agenda-setting uses attributes to make it easier for an audience to recall a certain aspect of a story, framing forces the reader to connect specific patterns of thought (Dietram A Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Frame analysis theory was introduced by Erving Goffman in 1974. It assumes that audience members cannot fully comprehend all that is happening around them, so they classify

and interpret their own experiences to make sense of the world (Entman, 1993). Robert Entman wrote: “Whatever its specific use, the concept of framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text” (Entman, 1993). Entman also wrote that to frame is to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (R. Entman, 1993). Entman defines salience as “making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful or memorable to audiences” (Entman, 1993). The underlying presumption is that media messages affect subsequent thought and action.

One of the best examples of framing came from the 1984 study by Kahneman and Tversky, which used the example of a possible outbreak of a deadly virus (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). In the study, the virus was expected to kill 600 people. The two researchers presented two groups of possibilities for their subjects. The first choice of program of treatment assumed that, if this course was taken, 200 people would be saved. The second choice stated that, if this program was chosen, there was a one-third probability that 600 people would be saved and a two-thirds probability that no people would be saved (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). Seventy-two percent of subjects chose the first possibility. A second group of possibilities then was presented to the subjects. In this possibility, the same scenario was presented but framed that if option A were chosen 400 people would die, and if option B were chosen there was a one-third possibility that no one would die and a two-thirds probability that 600 people would die (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). With this option, the same option as the first but framed differently, 78 percent of the subjects chose option B (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984).

The Kahneman & Tversky piece highlighted the importance of how information is presented to its viewers. Media play the major role in framing materials for the audience (Iyengar, 2005). Framing is a way journalists shape a story to conform to an existing frame of

reference for the reader (Entman, 2004a). This is done by making certain aspects of a piece of communication more salient by placing the object in a prominent spot of a broadcast or by repeating it often (Entman, 1993). Todd Gitlin wrote that media don't hold a mirror up to reality; media play a role in constructing reality (Gitlin, c1980).

An example can be found in how journalists choose specific words for a story. Pan and Kosicki wrote that word choice or the use of signifiers make aspects of a story more salient. "By using 'Iraqi dictator,' a news report places Saddam Hussein in the same category with Hitler, Noriega, Stalin and other generally hated men in American culture" (Zhongdang Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

The use of signifiers to make certain aspects of a story salient are one way to frame a story, while another comes from omitting aspects of a story. The omission of one piece of information or one aspect of a story can sway how viewers view an event (Entman, 1993). Framing helps supply the dominant meaning for the audience (Entman, 1993). Entman writes that researchers should avoid finding secondary meanings from dominant frames. He wrote: "If the text frame emphasizes in a variety of mutually reinforcing ways that the glass is half full, the evidence of social science suggests that relatively few in the audience will conclude it is half empty" (Entman, 1993).

Dietram Scheufele points out that frames occur from different perspectives, the media frame and the individual frame (D. A. Scheufele, 1999). The media frame serves to organize events in such a way that media members can understand (Gitlin, c1980). The media then pass that organized reality to the audience (Dietram A Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Media frames also serve as part of a working routine for a journalist, providing a "road map" for the journalist to easily recognize and organize information in a way that allows for "efficient relay to their

audiences” (Gitlin, c1980). Media gather information, synthesize it in a way that is easily recognizable to the journalist and also fits into an acceptable frame for the audience, and then pass this information along to the audience in the most easily recognizable form (D. A. Scheufele, 1999). Media frames can serve the purpose of systematically affecting how an audience may perceive the information they’re presented with (D. A. Scheufele, 1999). This is done through a number of processes, including journalistic routines (Zhongdang Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Media frames also establish who an authority on a situation is and who is excluded (Eastman & Billings, 2000).

Individual frames are the groups of ideas that help the individual process information (Entman, 1993). This recalls Walter Lippmann’s pictures in our heads (Lippmann, 1997).

Scheufele provides a framework for media studies by examining how frames can work as both independent and dependent variables in a study (D. A. Scheufele, 1999). When examining media frames as a dependent variable, Scheufele suggests the following research questions: “What factors influence the way journalists or other societal groups frame certain issues? How do these processes work and, as a result, what are the frames that journalists use?” (D. A. Scheufele, 1999)

When examining media frames as a dependent variable, a number of factors may influence how journalists frame a specific issue. Those include social norms, organizational pressures, influence from interest groups, journalistic routine, and the ideological orientation of journalists (Shoemaker, c1996.)

As an independent variable, Scheufele suggests the following question: “What kinds of media frames influence the audience’s perception of certain issues, and how does this process work?” (D. A. Scheufele, 1999) Points of study in this instance include patterns in phrases and

words; references to the general newsworthiness of the event; thematic structure; and rhetorical structure (Zhongdang Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

Scheufele notes that many of these studies are qualitative and states: “It is important to note that these studies make valuable contributions to using framing as a theory of mass media effects. The fact that they generally use data as illustrations rather than as rigid tests of their theoretical arguments is not a shortcoming” (D. A. Scheufele, 1999).

Most of the work done studying media framing occurs through the study of political discourse or public policy, but framing should not be limited to just those venues. In 2000, Susan Eastman and Andrew Billings argued that “media frames provide an important approach to analyzing sportscasts” (Eastman & Billings, 2000). Framing theory has been widely used in covering sports media. Many of these studies focus on gender. In 1996, Messner, Duncan and Wachs examined how television frames of the NCAA men’s basketball tournament differ from frames of the NCAA women’s basketball tournament (Messner, Duncan, & Wachs, 1990). Among their findings were instances where the men’s tournament were mentioned more frequently and with more serious signifiers, while women’s sports coverage often was ignored or covered with less gravitas than the men’s tournament (Messner et al., 1990). Eastman and Billings studied how ESPN, CNN’s Sports Tonight, the New York Times and USA Today covered women’s sports. The findings concluded that all four entities gave less preference to women’s sports and also framed women’s sports differently (Eastman & Billings, 2000). The authors found that male athletes were given more superlatives and talked about in a positive manner, while female athletes often were talked about in a sarcastic manner (Eastman & Billings, 2000). The authors also found that female athletes often were compared to male athletes as a compliment, but male athletes were never compared to female athletes as a compliment (Eastman

& Billings, 2000). Another study by Billings, Eastman and Angelini found that male golfers were more likely to be praised for an athletic feat, while female golfers may be criticized for a lack of athleticism (Billings, Angelini, & Eastman, 2005). In 2010 Jaye Atkinson and Steven Herro examined how framing affects television stereotypes of athletes and aging (Atkinson & Herro, 2010). These and other studies remind readers that frames are not just what the media mention and how they mention it, but what the media leave out of their messages as well (Billings et al., 2005; Messner et al., 1996). Sports news also has an emotional impact on fans and often is repeated countless times, building in biases that may not be noticeable or traceable for fans (Eastman & Billings, 2001). This establishes a link in the transfer of salience from the sportscaster to the fan (Eastman & Billings, 2001).

Frames can be altered. Iyengar conducted case studies in 2005 that demonstrated how easily frames change. By making minor changes to wording, he found that one can alter the meaning of a text (Iyengar, 2005). Minimal changes in the wording of attitude questions, which present a text in a way that will determine the subject's attitude, can produce major changes in opinion (Iyengar, 2005). Again, this easily transfers to the study of sports media, as repeated use of words to portray a certain code can become part of the language of the sport (Eastman & Land, 1997). Thus, black athletes may be portrayed as athletic while white athletes may be portrayed as smart (Stone, Perry, & Darley, 1997). Code words can play a large role in establishing a frame as well (Tyler Eastman & Billings, 2001). The media may use words to build a perception of the viewers that follows the media's specific agenda for that topic (Atkinson & Herro, 2010).

BIAS

Media bias is most often associated with political discourse (Covert & Wasburn, 2007). Defining bias sometimes is difficult. Entman wrote that bias is best placed into three categories: distortion bias, content bias and decision-making bias (Entman, 2007). Distortion bias applies to news that “purportedly distorts or falsifies reality”(Entman, 2007). Content bias applies to news that “favors one side rather than providing equivalent treatment to both sides in a conflict” (Entman, 2007). Decision-making bias examines the “mindsets of journalists who allegedly produce the biased content”(Entman, 2007).

Studies that examine bias also must take into consideration perception of bias. Researchers such as Tim Groseclose (Groseclose, 2011) or Eric Alterman (Alterman, 2003) examine how media cover politics and reach completely different conclusions (Anand, Di Tella, & Galetovic, 2007). Groseclose finds that media have a liberal slant, while Alterman finds that media are not liberal – and, in fact, slant conservatively. Studies also show that audiences react to news separately – sometimes identifying with the reported facts, and other times believing news media are taking a slant directly opposite to their points of view (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985).

Bias studies require a separation between slant and bias (Entman, 2007). Slant often is proven in studies (Alterman, 2003; Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Groseclose, 2011; Kahn & Kenney, 2002). Slant alone does not prove a bias (Entman, 2007). To find bias, one must have a working definition of it. Entman defined content bias as “consistent patterns in the framing of mediated communication that promote the influence of one side in conflicts” (Entman, 2007). Entman believes that to prove a media bias researchers must “show patterns of slant that

regularly prime audiences, consciously or unconsciously to support the interests of particular holders or seekers of political power” (Entman, 2007).

Entman confines his research to the political aspects of media framing and bias. The same techniques have been studied concerning sports media as well. Numerous studies have examined how framing affects can be traced through studies of racial and gender inequality in sports coverage (Atkinson & Herro, 2010; Billings et al., 2005; Eastman & Billings, 2000; Tyler Eastman & Billings, 2001). These studies all examine how bias is built into specific frames, including those of equality in race and gender. A 2010 study examined how criminal behavior from athletes was framed in newspapers (Seate, Harwood, & Blecha, 2010). The study found that the way messages are framed influence how the athletes are perceived (Seate et al., 2010).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Media corporations are in the business of making money. Whether their content is news, entertainment, commentary, sports, or a combination of all of these, their goal is to make money (Richards, 2010). To make money, media enterprises must exploit the market they use (Richards, 2010). While the market and the forces that control it have no ethical values, the decisions made concerning news and how that affects the market play a big role in ethical decisions of a media enterprise (Richards, 2010). As media corporations become more entrenched in the news business, ethical considerations about news stories become important, especially as more people in charge of news media operations have less experience in the news business (Richards, 2010). As media corporations continue to expand, problems with conflict of interest continue to grow as well.

Conflict of interest can be defined as a situation where journalists or media companies face situations that may compromise their ability to provide information to the public they serve, either because of situations that may involve split loyalties or obligations, or because of the appearance of split loyalties or obligations (Wasserman, 2010). Conflict of interest can occur in a number of ways, but one of the most pervasive comes from within the corporate structure (Wasserman, 2010). Since most news media are advertising-based, it becomes a question of whether or not to cover events that appeal to certain demographics to increase the demographic (Wasserman, 2010). In today's media world, it becomes almost impossible for journalists to work without having to balance their professional obligations against their corporate obligations, and all of their obligations against their personal needs (Wasserman, 2010).

POLITICAL ECONOMY

Political economy is important to this study because it answers why ESPN concentrates its coverage on the six major conferences when discussing the NCAA Tournament bubble. A political economy examination provides an understanding of why ESPN's SportsCenter drives the media agenda toward coverage of schools from the six major conferences.

This study examined the relationships between the NCAA conferences and the major media corporations that control the vast amount of money that flows into college sports. Delving deeper into this relationship allows a better understanding of the relationship between conferences and their brands (teams), major media corporations and television ratings, and a historical pattern of television coverage that has conditioned fans to believe the best product comes from the six major conferences.

The first task is to separate universities and conferences into separate entities.

Universities exist as institutions of higher learning. They have their own special hierarchy and a way of doing business based on an academic model (Clotfelter, 2011). Universities and college conferences that are involved in sports at the NCAA Division I level have a different model. This model is an “entertainment product” (Benford, 2007; Clotfelter, 2011; Yost, 2009). The entertainment product is responsible for running college sports (Clotfelter, 2011). College sports at major universities ensure that athletes who attend these universities attend class, make academic progress, stay out of trouble – and, most of all, avoid instances where they bring negative public relations to their universities (Yost, 2009). The entertainment product at schools bring in money through marketing, television revenues, licensing of products, ticket revenues, video games, and other forms (Benford, 2007; Clotfelter, 2011; Yost, 2009).

The goal of these institutions is to sell their product to corporations that will pay to sell advertising, therefore commodifying the sport (Wenner, 1989a). College sports reach a specific audience – affluent males between the ages of 18 and 40 – that is in great demand for advertisers (Wenner, 1998). These advertisers want the widest range of viewers for their products, knowing that advertising for sporting events sometimes leads to a positive connection between their product and the audience (Wenner, 2007).

The more prestigious the university, the more important the entertainment product becomes. In Charles T. Clotfelter’s book “Big-Time Sports in American Universities,” Clotfelter noted that, of the top 100 football teams in 1920, 60 were still among the top 100 today (Clotfelter, 2011). The same can be said for college basketball. UCLA, North Carolina, Kansas, and Kentucky are almost always among the top teams, and the major conferences have always housed the premier college football and basketball teams (discounting Notre Dame in football).

The six major conferences have always been athletically wealthier than the other conferences. Television money amplified that situation (Clotfelter, 2011).

The six major conferences work together as an oligopoly within the NCAA cartel and operate with major television corporations to dominate the college sports market (Clotfelter, 2011). An oligopoly is a market structure with a few principal sellers that hold a significant share of the market (Kunz, 2006). An oligopoly occurs when a small group of sellers within an economic construct combines to dominate the market. These sellers understand that whatever action they take will affect the other firms and will elicit a similar response from those firms (Brock, 2006). An oligopoly works because the groups need each other, and they can make a larger profit working together instead of in direct competition against each other (Brock, 2006). Even though these conferences work against each other in terms of building the better product through league expansion and gaining a larger share of television and marketing money, they still work together in controlling the vast profits derived from NCAA television revenues (Yost, 2009).

A hegemonic structure of power exists within the dynamic of what Clotfelter defined as “big-time” (Clotfelter, 2011) college conferences and television corporations in order to maintain control of the demographic target audience. The college basketball audience has been conditioned to believe, through years of mediated sports coverage, that the best teams always come from within the six major conferences. Because this has been said for so long, it becomes common sense and therefore is naturalized as a hegemonic force (Wenner, 1989a). In the same way that racial and gender stereotypes have been built into broadcasts (Billings et al., 2005; Covert & Wasburn, 2007; Entman, 2004b), conditioning goes deeper than just the traditional teams at the top of the conference. Teams in the middle (and even near the bottom) of these

conferences receive the same hegemonic benefits as teams with history and prestige, because they play in these preferred conferences (Wenner, 1989a). These teams are packaged as superior to top-level teams from the other conferences for a reason (Litos, 2008). Quality teams from other conferences become left out of this paradigm because they become more difficult to sell as quality, according to the set parameters (Wenner, 1989a).

College conferences work as institutionalized markets for their brand, the selling of college sports television rights (Meehan & Torre, 2011). The conferences brand themselves to the public by conference affiliation – the Big Ten on CBS, etc. – while at the same time offering rights to media corporations as something different: as institutions that provide long-term stability (Meehan & Torre, 2011). The teams become individualized brands, products designed to draw viewers, or fans to their teams. Each individual team brings its own brand equity – which, when combined, strengthen the entire conference. This happens in three ways. First, each individual team or brand acts as a magnet for more fans (Lemon, Rust, & Zeithaml, 2001). Each conference has a number of traditional powers, teams that have excelled over the years, teams that have tremendous fan bases or customer loyalty, teams that have tradition behind them, and teams that are high-quality products. Second, fans or consumers build an emotional tie with each individual brand, or team, and that leads to increased identification with the company, or conference (Lemon et al., 2001). This becomes value loyalty for the fan (Lemon et al., 2001).

The third way to strengthen the conference occurs when the conference enhances its image through specific actions, such as placing a large number of brands, or teams, in the NCAA Tournament (Lemon, et al., 2001).

“Value equity matters to most customers most of the time, but it will be most important under specific circumstances. First, value equity will be most critical when discernible differences exist between competing products. In commodity markets,

where products and competitors are often fungible, value equity is difficult to build. However, when there are differences between competing products, a firm can grow value equity by influencing customer perceptions of value” (Lemon et al., 2001).

The teams want to build equity in their brands by improving their name awareness to fans, improving the perceived quality of the brand by these fans, and linking to associations that improve both the awareness and the perceived quality of the brand (Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998).

Media corporations market conferences as high quality to the fans. Through exposure and news routines, they are able to frame the teams from the six conferences as superior to those from the other 25 conferences, including framing the mediocre teams from the top conferences as superior to the top teams from the other 25 conferences.

One of the ways media corporations set this frame is through news routine. Media commonly seek out journalists whose values and beliefs mirror that of the audience they try to reach (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). This also pertains to sports media. ESPN, owned by Disney, hires analysts who have knowledge mainly of the six conferences. During the 2010-2011 college basketball season, ESPN listed on its website the biographies of a dozen analysts whose specialty was college basketball. Of those, only two – Tom Brennan and Andy Katz – have extensive backgrounds outside of the six major conferences. The others all played or coached a large part of their careers in the six conferences.¹ It’s understandable that these sports personalities concentrate on the six major conferences, since that’s what they know. An example comes from the February 25, 2011, showing of College GameDay on ESPN. During this show, analysts were

asked to pick the winners of specific games. One game was the Wichita State-Missouri State matchup in the Missouri Valley Conference. Bob Knight, former University of Indiana and Texas Tech University coach and current ESPN college basketball analyst, when asked to predict the winner, coughed and admitted that he had little to no knowledge of those teams (“College GameDay,” 2011a).

Many narratives may occur within this dynamic as long as the result is the same: The six major conferences must reign supreme to maintain the hegemonic hierarchy. When a story line defies the traditional narrative, such as Butler reaching the NCAA championship game in 2010, a special frame is put in place: the Cinderella narrative. This study also examined how news media framed Butler as a Cinderella in the week leading to the Final Four weekend. This research previously examined how ESPN frames the differences between the six conferences and the other 25 NCAA Division I conferences. This study is different than those. This is an examination of how a specific frame can be used to reinforce a hegemonic influence by firmly placing Butler, a school from a conference outside of the top six, in the role of Cinderella (Maney, Woehrle, & Coy, 2005). The narrative for the game was centered around this frame, starting with the two teams’ names. A butler is a servant, while a duke is a nobleman (Whelliston, 2010). The end result of the game reinforced the major narrative of the six major conferences’ superiority (Whelliston, 2010).

Political economists point to hegemony as a tool that uses inclusion or exclusion as a means for maintaining power (Maney et al., 2005). Hegemony can be defined as a “concept that

¹ They include: Bob Knight, Digger Phelps, Jay Williams, Jay Bilas, Hubert Davis, Doug Gottlieb, Mark Gottfried and Stephen Bardo.

highlights persuasion as a form of social control (Maney et al., 2005). Framing can be linked to the distribution of social and political power (Gitlin, c1980). Using this definition, long-term framing of a particular subject – specifically, the way that sports media frame teams from outside of the top six conferences – compared to how the same media frame schools from within the six power conferences can be viewed as a form of long-term persuasion that this is true, which makes it hegemony (Morris, 1992). The sponsor of the frame becomes important (Carragee & Roefs, 2004).

Production also plays a role in the hegemonic process of framing (M. Real, 1996). Michael Real wrote that “The question of who makes it, why, in what interests, for whose benefits, with what profits, through which channels and with what influence over audience interpretation (M. Real, 1996) is an important factor in studying a cultural artifact”.

The return of Butler a year later worked against the major narrative and served as a challenge to the accepted hegemonic frame (Maney et al., 2005). Butler’s success sparked a shift in the college basketball world that eventually led to Butler’s departure from the low mid-major Horizon League to the Atlantic Ten Conference, a conference that has more media power and prestige, while still being outside of the royalty of the six major conferences (Maney et al., 2005).

Certain conferences have larger television-rights contracts, and for that reason they receive more media coverage than other conferences (Sweitzer, 2009). This leads to situations where conferences try to expand to make them more palatable to television outlets (Rapp, 2005).

The Big East Conference was formed with television marketing in mind. In 1979, a group of East Coast universities came up with the idea of forming a conference that comprised teams from the top media markets on the East Coast, including New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Boston. The major purpose of this conference was to band together to

make an appealing brand of college basketball that would be marketable for television (Byers & Hammer, 1995). The marketing directors suggested that the conference be named the Big East Conference (Byers & Hammer, 1995).² Other conferences have added teams to garner more television exposure.³

² That conference used cable television to become a household name, especially a fledgling cable network called ESPN (Rasmussen, 1983a). By gaining exposure on ESPN, the Big East quickly became popular and powerful. It expanded that power to football in the 1990s and became one of the six Bowl Championship Series conferences.

³ An example could be the 2003 expansion of the Atlantic Coast Conference, which brought in football powers Miami, Virginia Tech, and Boston College from the Big East Conference to enhance its football reputation. The Big East countered by adding DePaul, Louisville, Cincinnati, South Florida, and Marquette from Conference USA to enhance its basketball profitability, and to raise its profile in markets in the Midwest (Chicago, Louisville, Milwaukee, and Cincinnati) and the Southeast (South Florida) (Rapp, 2005). In 2010, the Big Ten Conference raided the Big 12 Conference and added the University of Nebraska, while the Pac-10 added the University of Colorado from the Big 12 and the University of Utah from the Mountain West Conference. Not to be outdone, the Big East followed suit by adding Texas Christian University to its conference. The next year, Syracuse and the University of Pittsburgh announced their intentions to leave the Big East for the Atlantic Coast Conference. The University of West Virginia announced its intentions to leave the Big East Conference for the Big 12 Conference, and a number of teams were added to the Big East Conference. In the fall of 2012, Notre Dame University announced that it would leave the Big East to join the Atlantic Coast Conference in all sports but football. Notre Dame has its own national football contract and remains an independent for football. Following Rapp's reasoning, these moves were done to strengthen the respective conferences' profiles for media institutions (Rapp, 2005).

The influx of money from conference to conference plays a role in realignment, and media entities such as ESPN also play a role. Media entities outside of Disney chronicled the role ESPN played in the 2011 realignment of conferences. One factor is ESPN's launching of the Longhorn Network. ESPN paid the University of Texas \$300 million for the rights to distribute sports programming for the University of Texas (McBride, 2011). This gives ESPN a financial reason to promote the University of Texas' sports programs, and it puts the station in the position of needing the University of Texas to do well (Chittum, 2011).⁴ The realignment emphasized ESPN's conflict of interest as both a media entity and a sports journalism agenda setter. A Columbia Journalism Review article details how ESPN commentators and journalists avoided mention of the Longhorn Network as Texas A&M announced its intention to leave the Big 12 Conference (Chittum, 2011).

When the University of Pittsburgh and Syracuse University announced their intentions to leave the Big East Conference for the Atlantic Coast Conference, media noted ESPN's conflict of interest again.⁵

⁴ This was one factor that led to Texas A&M's decision to leave the Big 12 for the Southeastern Conference, but it wasn't the only reason. The Big 12 Conference was one of the few conferences that did not share its revenues evenly until after Texas A&M left the conference. The University of Missouri also declared its intentions to leave the Big 12 Conference for the Southeastern Conference.

⁵ Boston College University Athletic Director Gene DeFillippo was quoted on Boston.com as saying: "We always keep our television partners close to us. You don't get extra money for basketball. It's 85 percent football money. TV - ESPN - is the one who told us what to do. This was football; it had nothing to do with basketball." (Blaudschun, 2011b) Three days later, he

CULTURAL ANALYSIS

MEDIA CONSTRUCTION OF SPORTS

The media construct athletics through specific routines learned throughout the years (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Sports media often use traditional narratives to enhance audience interest. One form is that of the heroic or mythical archetype (M. Real, 1996). Butterworth defined myth as the symbolic expression of stories or even a word (Butterworth, 2007). Myths explain events or provide meaning to events (Butterworth, 2007). As fans, the process of mediated sport becomes “normal”(Wenner, 1989). Fans follow sport, teams and the celebrity-making that occurs in the sport. Winning is important, but losing in a way that upholds media ideals is also tolerated (Duret & Wolf, 1994). Sport narratives are often presented symbolically, as a way of maintaining and celebrating the dominant ideals of society (Trujillo, 1991). Sports narratives elevate teams that fit the hegemonic ideals celebrated by the media and do the opposite to those that don't (Trujillo, 1991). Media celebrate traits that promote the status quo, or the values of the dominant class (Trujillo, 1991).

Sports fans pick a team they want to win (M. Real, 1996). The fan then builds a relationship with the team, identifying with certain traits (M. R. Real & Mechikoff, 1992). Media enhance certain traits, allowing for binary opposition to create those both for and against specific archetypes (M. Real, 1996). Fans choose between certain binaries, winner/loser, good/evil, big/small (M. Real, 1996). One used often by media concerning NCAA college basketball teams that are outside of the six major conferences is that of David/Goliath. Using the binary approach conjures images of great heroic feats and pits the team playing David as a natural favorite among

recanted his statement in the same newspaper (Blaudschun, 2011a). Money and television

fans because of the heroic archetype that it implies (M. R. Real & Mechikoff, 1992). At the same time, this allows media to other both teams and allows fans to become a “generalized other” (M. Real, 1996). Othering is a concept that recognizes the group in power as normal and according that group first status (Nakamura, 2005). It can also be defined in binary terms, the binary of us/them (Stenbacka, 2011). Most often used in issues that concern race, Richard Dyer, in his seminal text *White* explains that whiteness is constructed as normal, pure and clean (Dyer, 1997). It’s difficult for many whites to look at themselves as a race because they start from the assumption that they are normal, not placed in a category, not othered in any way (Dyer, 1997). Whites come from a standpoint of respectability and a moral distance from the others (Fusco, 2005). Therefore, those of different races are considered “other” and therefore less than the white (Fusco, 2005). In fact, the act of not citing whiteness as an indicator helps the process of othering (Dyer, 1997). Once othered, stereotypes are created to describe the “other” as darker, less respectable, less moral and less pure than white (Dyer, 1997).

Race is not the only form of othering. The concept has been used in issues concerning nationality (Nakamura, 2005), gender, locality (Stenbacka, 2011), and individuality (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). The term can be used in any form where power is used to separate groups into opposing binaries of us/them.

connections play a significant role in conference selection.

THE NCAA TOURNAMENT

The National Collegiate Athletic Association men's basketball tournament is a lucrative business. CBS owned the rights to broadcast the tournament after the 2010 season. At that time, CBS was in the middle of a \$6 billion contract that ran through 2013, with an option for the NCAA to opt out of the tournament after 2010. The NCAA exercised that option and signed a new 14-year, \$10.8-billion deal with CBS and Turner Broadcasting Co. (NCAA, 2010). The money generated from the television rights goes to the conferences and universities represented in the tournament. NCAA-affiliated conferences received \$168.4 million in television revenues from the 2009-2010 season (NCAA, 2011). That number represents 86 percent of the NCAA revenue for that year (NCAA, 2011). The NCAA distributes the money over a rolling six-year plan that rewards conferences for the number of games played in the NCAA Tournament. The NCAA gives a unit, or share, to each conference for every game a team from that conference plays in the tournament for six consecutive years. The share for the 2010-2011 season was \$239,664 for each unit. The conferences then parcel out revenue payments to individual schools (Fulks, August 2009). The number of bids each conference receives to participate in the NCAA men's basketball tournament is important, as is the number of games each conference wins in the tournament, because each bid and each victory generate revenue for the respective conferences. The money helps pay for athletic budgets and for conferences outside of the six major conferences; in fact, television revenue money can mean the difference between an athletic department making or losing money (Shapiro et al., 2009).

The 2010 NCAA men's basketball tournament comprised 65 teams. The 2011 tournament comprised 68 teams. Of those, 30 teams received automatic bids by winning their conference tournaments, and the Ivy League's regular-season champion also received an

automatic bid. The NCAA selection committee chose the final 34 teams in 2010 and final 37 teams in 2011 as at-large selections. These teams are supposed to be the best remaining teams in the United States, and NCAA guidelines say the selection process is supposed to pick those teams without regard to conference or past success ("NCAA," 2010).

THE SELECTION PROCESS

At-large selection is defined as the process the selection committee uses to determine the 37 best remaining teams after the automatic qualifiers are admitted into the NCAA Tournament field (Shapiro et al., 2009). The selection committee consists of 10 individuals, and each one serves a five-year term. Each year, two new members are selected to the committee and two members leave (Shapiro et al., 2009). Each committee member is given a report called the “nitty-gritty” report (Coleman & Lynch, 2001) that places certain criteria used to determine each eligible team at the committee’s fingertips (Coleman & Lynch, 2001). This report includes many of the following: a team’s overall winning percentage; its ratings percentage index; total wins; total non-conference wins; winning percentage in conference; road wins; wins against teams in the RPI’s top 25; wins against teams in the RPI’s top 50; wins against teams in the RPI’s top 100; total losses; total conference losses; total road losses; losses against teams in the RPI’s top 25; losses against teams in the top 50; losses against teams in the top 100; and “bad losses,” or losses against teams with an RPI of greater than 100 (Coleman & Lynch, 2001).

The ratings percentage index plays a role in selection of teams into the tournament. The RPI first was used in 1981 as a tool to assess college basketball teams (Shapiro et al., 2009). The formula is determined by calculating 25 percent of a team’s winning percentage, 50 percent of the team’s opponent’s winning percentage, and 25 percent of the opponent’s opponents winning

percentage (Sanders, 2007). Road wins also are given preference over home wins (Sanders, 2007).

In an interview with Missouri Valley Conference Commissioner Doug Elgin, former chair of the NCAA selection committee, he described the process of selecting the final few teams for the tournament as difficult. These final teams aren't easily definable as "locks" for selection into the tournament; they are known instead as "bubble" teams. The bubble teams have good résumés for the tournament but also sport a number of negative marks. These could include strength of schedule, key losses, bad losses, or a bad record against teams that are in the top 50 teams in the country (Mergola, 2009). The process becomes more difficult as the number of available spots dwindles. Conference tournament week becomes important as teams earn automatic bids, or as teams lose and must compete for an at-large bid. This makes the process extremely fluid. Sometimes a team from a smaller league loses in its conference tournament and forces the committee to make a decision to put that team in the tournament with an at-large bid. When this happens, the number of available bids shrinks. In conferences with multiple numbers of teams expected to qualify, if one of those teams wins its conference tournament, it keeps the at-large pool larger (Mergola, 2009). By the time the selection process occurs, most teams know if they are in the tournament or not. Still, the committee must make a final decision on about 10 to 12 teams for six to eight spots. This is the "bubble."

The selection committee consists of 10 individuals from NCAA institutions (B. J. Coleman et al., 2010). Each year, two members leave the committee and two more are selected to join the committee (B. J. Coleman et al., 2010). Their job is to select the 38 at-large teams for the NCAA Tournament (B. J. Coleman et al., 2010). Deciding if a team from one of the six major conferences with a number of losses but some big wins is more capable of playing better in the

tournament than other teams from smaller conferences is difficult, and committee members often must rely on their knowledge of the teams or conferences (Shapiro et al., 2009). When succumbing to the so-called “eye test,” a method of selection that requires a selection member to watch a team and determine the team is worthy of selection because it “looks” like an NCAA Tournament-caliber team, exposure to television could play a role (Shapiro et al., 2009).

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

THE NCAA AND TELEVISION

The NCAA formed in 1906 as the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States (Lazaroff, 2007). In 1910, it changed its name to the NCAA. The original goal was to curtail violence in football and maintain college sports' amateur status(Lazaroff, 2007). The NCAA today represents a cartel of 1,291 institutions involved at the Division I, II, or III levels ("NCAA," 2010). It has the responsibility of enforcing rules on the recruiting and eligibility of athletes (Eckard, 1998). Interestingly enough, the NCAA gained this responsibility, over a dispute about television rights.

The NCAA had little power through the 1930s, despite growing in size. The power of rule making and the ability to market the universities and colleges was left to the individual universities and the conferences (Dunnivant, 2004). The power shifted with the advent of television.

On May 17, 1939, NBC covered the first sporting event on television: a baseball game between Princeton and Columbia (Schwartz, 2010). On Sept. 30, 1939, Fordham beat Waynesboro State 34-7 in the first televised football game (Schwartz, 2010). On February 28, 1940, Fordham lost to the University of Pittsburgh 50-37 in the first televised NCAA basketball game (Schwartz, 2010). Televising games became more prominent and as they proliferated, questions arose about how to handle television rights. Through the 1940s, televised college sports were decided by home rule, meaning the home team could sell the rights to television and radio. Some universities, such as Notre Dame and the University of Pennsylvania, took

advantage of this process (Zimbalist, 1999). In 1951, the University of Pennsylvania was offered \$850,000 by DuMont for the rights to broadcast its home football games for three years (Zimbalist, 1999). Notre Dame also was interested in pursuing national television rights. At the same time, the NCAA committee was meeting in 1951 to discuss television rights. Presidents of some universities, as well as athletic directors, were afraid of television. They believed in newspaper reports that (Dunnivant, 2004, Zimbalist, 1999) raised the possibility of losing fans to college events, which meant losing the ticket sales to those events because those fans would stay home and watch the game on television (Zimbalist, 1999). In 1951 the NCAA committee voted to end “home rule” for college football (Zimbalist, 1999). The result was a restricted number of broadcasts in 1951 (Dunnivant, 2004). Penn announced its intentions to continue with its national broadcast schedule anyway. The NCAA notified Penn that if it did so, it would violate NCAA policy and would be considered a renegade school (Dunnivant, 2004). Penn threatened to sue the NCAA but ultimately backed down, despite having a strong legal case. This action solidified the power of the NCAA as a national group, and as it gained control of football television broadcast rights it broadened its power over participating universities (Dunnivant, 2004). At this time, football was the only sport the NCAA felt the need to control, because at that time other sports were not receiving the same level of national attention or attendance as football (Dunnivant, 2004). Within years, the NCAA had the power to control television broadcast rights for football and for other national television events. It also usurped the power to hold schools in violation of policy, taking that authority from the conferences (Dunnivant, 2004). Thus, the NCAA gained its national leverage in large part due to television (Dunnivant, 2004).

In 1952, Walter Byers was named Executive Director of the NCAA, making him the key person in building the NCAA’s television contracts with national television networks

(Dunnivant, 2004). His first order of business was to establish a working order in presenting television broadcasts. College football already had a number of powerhouse teams and conferences, including at that time the Ivy League (Dunnivant, 2004). The NCAA had to find a way to satisfy television viewers, while also presenting a fair sample of college football games across the country. The result was a football package that only allowed teams to appear a limited number of times each year, with the number growing over the years (Dunnivant, 2004). The NCAA was free to present the major broadcasts of the week, showing the powerhouse teams on a weekly basis, but only so many times nationally per year. The NCAA promoted the buildup of crucial games and broadened the power structure of its conferences. Despite the original plan to display a number of different teams, the traditionally powerful teams and conferences received higher ratings. Fans wanted to see the top teams and the top conferences, and the coaches, athletic directors and presidents of the universities wanted the exposure and the money that came from television appearances (Dunnivant, 2004). By the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, the big football conferences wanted more power and control over the television rights. Already dominant in the size of their programs and with the lion's share of television rights, the traditional powers kept pushing for more.

The universities and conferences outside the power elite fought for a more balanced and equitable solution to the NCAA televisionrights dollar. In 1975, California State University-Long Beach President, Stephen Horn, wrote a letter to all the college presidents asking that television revenue from college football and basketball be shared equally among NCAA schools (Smith, 2001). University of Michigan Athletic Director, Donald Canham, called the proposal an act of socialism and railed against it (Smith, 2001). As a result, a rift developed between the power football conferences and other NCAA conferences, both football and non-football. The major

football conferences didn't like the idea of smaller schools dictating policy, especially when it concerned football (Dunnavant, 2004).

College basketball's growth was slower and less turbulent than football's. Throughout the 1950s and '60s, college basketball lagged behind football in television interest. The key interest came from the NCAA men's basketball tournament and rights to the championship game. The first nationally televised NCAA men's basketball tournament championship game occurred in 1954, when LaSalle defeated Bradley 94-76 ("NCAA Tournament history," 2007). In 1963, the major networks ignored the Final Four (Smith, 2001). The rights to the tournament were picked up by Sports Network Incorporated for about \$200,000 per year (Smith, 2001). At this point, NCAA men's basketball tournament rights were less than 1 percent of the funds brought in by the NCAA football television plan and the bowl revenues (Smith, 2001). As for regular-season games, there was very little interest nationally, although universities or conferences were welcome to sign their own regional deals (Smith, 2001). But the game, and the interest in it, would change. The rise of UCLA as a national powerhouse drew fans' attention. On January 20, 1968, more than 50,000 fans packed the Houston Astrodome to watch Houston's Elvin Hayes play against Lew Alcindor (later known as Kareem Abdul Jabaar) and UCLA. The game was broadcast on 150 television stations in 49 states (Smith, 2001). The next year, NBC bought the rights to televise the NCAA tournament for half a million dollars ("NCAA Tournament history," 2007).

ESPN AND COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Although college basketball was gaining popularity on television, it took a pair of major events to draw large numbers of fans to the game. Thus, the year 1979 became critically

important for college basketball's relationship with television for three reasons. The first was the 1979 NCAA men's basketball's Final Four. The teams that played in the championship game that year were Michigan State University, led by talented guard Earvin "Magic" Johnson, and Indiana State University, led by Larry Bird (Davis, 2009).⁶ The matchup drew national interest because teams' respective stars (Bird and Johnson) made for compelling television. Michigan State's Johnson lit up the television screen with his smile, while the shy and introverted Bird, whose Indiana State team was undefeated heading into the game, avoided the press (Davis, 2009). Johnson was black and Bird was white, which gave the game a racial angle. Moreover, many people had never seen either of the teams play (Davis, 2009).⁷ In the end, Michigan State defeated Indiana State 75-64 in a game that was not a masterpiece by any means. However, the game started a rivalry between Johnson and Bird that would carry over into their professional careers, reigniting interest in the NBA. More importantly, the buildup for the game and the national interest drew advertisers' attention increasing the interest in college basketball (Davis, 2009).

While Magic and Bird earned a great deal of attention in the spring of 1979, another major shift that would change the perception of college basketball occurred the same year. Importantly, the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) was launched as a 24-hour sports cable network. (Rasmussen, 1983a). Knowing that it needed a sport to draw viewers and the attention of other media the network focused on college basketball. ESPN covered its

⁶ The other two teams were the Ivy League's Penn and tiny DePaul University, led by an aging Ray Meyer and televised often by WGN, a national cable station based out of Chicago (Davis, 2009).

first game that year, a DePaul victory over Wisconsin (Freeman, 2001) and more games followed. The network aired a limited number of early round NCAA games in 1980. In 1982, ESPN was granted the rights to cover all of the early rounds of the NCAA Tournament (Davis, 2009)⁸ and continued to do so through the 1980s, introducing a number of techniques that were used in ensuing years, including cutting to the endings of close games and then switching back to other games to give fans an idea of what was happening in all the games and creating an atmosphere that connected the entire tournament (Davis, 2009).

In 1986, ESPN started airing Championship Week, which covered all of the conference championship games. The network also was quick to air games played by the Big East, the new league that began play in the 1979 season. Fans flocked to the cable network, new innovations were launched and more and more games were aired by the network. ESPN started buying rights to cover conference athletic events, most often using a combination of football and basketball in their television rights packages (Freeman, 2001).

ESPN now airs in more than 99.5 million homes and is owned by Disney Corp. Currently, ESPN broadcasts more than 1,200 games during the 2010-2011 season on its various media outlets. At the same time, as many as 100 million people watched ESPN's hour-long flagship program, *SportsCenter* on ESPN each month ("ESPN Corporate Information," 2010).

The show became a cultural phenomenon in the 1990s, with entertaining anchors presenting news that came from well-known sports journalists such as Chris Mortenson and

⁷ In fact, Indiana State University played on national television just three times before its championship game that year (Davis, 2009).

⁸ Since the Big East had schools in so many major markets on the East Coast, it drew solid ratings (Davis, 2009).

Andrea Kremer, both of whom came from the Atlanta Journal Constitution, or Charlie Steiner, who had previously worked as a radio journalist (Freeman, 2001). ESPN lured these journalists to boost the network's credibility among professionals as well as fans. *SportsCenter* became the most influential sports show on television, both culturally and journalistically (Freeman, 2001), combining "schtick, superb writing and great reporting, and became a must-see for athletes and fans alike" (Freeman, 2001).

Athletes wanted to be on *SportsCenter*, fans were glued to the show, and those knowledgeable in the world of sports had no choice but to pay attention to it (Freeman, 2001). *SportsCenter* is the only hour-long sports journalism show that airs on a daily basis. It also deals daily with conflict-of-interest issues stemming from a network that has television rights to broadcast more than 1,200 college basketball games, that must promote those games on its flagship station, and that must promote other ventures that are profitable for Disney Corp. (*ESPN's Men's College Basketball Schedule: A Record 1,200 Games across Multiple Platforms*, 2010)

FOLLOWING FOOTBALL: CONFERENCE REALIGNMENT

In 1984, a Supreme Court ruling, *NCAA v. the University of Oklahoma Regents*, ended the NCAA's monopoly on negotiating television rights deals for football, giving each school and conference the opportunity to create their own deals (Dunnivant, 2004). The result was that conferences started "branding" their teams – and they combined their brands into what eventually became the BCS (Clotfelter, 2011). The major powers in football didn't have to worry about all the other schools; they were able to secure television deals that benefited their particular conferences (Dunnivant, 2004). This put the majority of football bowl money into the hands of the six BCS conferences (Dunnivant, 2004). That bowl money became important. To keep the

money centralized, the networks started to promote the schools from the major conferences. These conferences contained, and still contain, the vast majority of national contenders (Clotfelter, 2011). Other non-contender schools in those leagues benefited from their success. As television deals grew for these conferences, so did the desire to consolidate most powerhouse football schools into these six major conferences (Dunnivant, 2004). The Big East, built as a basketball school, added the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Miami to its conference during the 1991-1992 school year (Sweitzer, 2009).

In 1993-1994, Penn State University joined the Big Ten Conference (Sweitzer, 2009). In 1995-1996, teams from the Great Midwest Conference and the Metro Conference joined to form Conference USA. Teams included Cincinnati, Louisville, Memphis, DePaul, Marquette, South Florida, Southern Mississippi, Tulane, University of Alabama-Birmingham and the University of Charlotte (Sweitzer, 2009). The 1996-1997 season was a big year for conference realignment. The Southwestern Athletic Conference, once one of the power conferences with schools like the University of Texas, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, and Baylor competing, folded. The four Texas schools joined the Big Eight Conference, which already had football powerhouses the University of Nebraska and the University of Oklahoma competing and formed the Big 12 Conference, one of the six BCS conference (Fort, 2007).

The 2003 expansion of the Atlantic Coast Conference brought in football powers Miami, Virginia Tech, and Boston College from the Big East Conference to enhance its football reputation. The Big East countered by adding DePaul, Louisville, Cincinnati, South Florida, and Marquette from Conference USA to enhance its basketball profitability, and to raise its profile in markets in the Midwest (Chicago, Louisville, Milwaukee, and Cincinnati) and the Southeast

(South Florida) (Rapp, 2005). In 2010, the Big Ten Conference raided the Big 12 Conference and added the University of Nebraska, while the Pac-10 added the University of Colorado from the Big 12 and the University of Utah from the Mountain West Conference. Texas A&M University and the University of Missouri left the Big 12 to join the Southeastern Conference.

The Big East added Texas Christian University to its conference. The next year, Syracuse and the University of Pittsburgh announced their intentions to leave the Big East for the Atlantic Coast Conference and Texas Christian University joined the Big 12 Conference instead of the Big East. The University of West Virginia announced its intentions to leave the Big East Conference for the Big 12 Conference, and a number of teams were added to the Big East Conference. In the fall of 2012, Notre Dame University announced that it would leave the Big East to join the Atlantic Coast Conference in all sports but football. Notre Dame had its own national football contract but joined the Atlantic Coast Conference in all sports, including football, in 2014.

The Big Ten took the University of Maryland from the Atlantic Coast Conference and the University of Rutgers from the Big East in order to get a stronger market share on the East Coast. Following Rapp's reasoning, these moves were done to strengthen the respective conferences' profiles for media institutions (Rapp, 2005)

The influx of money from conference to conference plays a role in realignment, and media entities such as ESPN also play a role. Media entities outside of Disney chronicled the role ESPN played in the 2011 realignment of conferences. One factor is ESPN's launching of the Longhorn Network. Specifically, the network paid the University of Texas \$300 million for the rights to distribute sports programming for the University of Texas (McBride, 2011). This gives

ESPN a financial reason to promote the University of Texas' sports programs, and it puts the station in the position of needing the University of Texas to do well (Chittum, 2011). The realignment emphasized ESPN's conflict of interest as both a media entity and a sports journalism agenda setter. A Columbia Journalism Review article details how ESPN commentators and journalists avoided mention of the Longhorn Network as Texas A&M announced its intention to leave the Big 12 Conference (Chittum, 2011).

This was one factor that led to Texas A&M's decision to leave the Big 12 for the Southeastern Conference, but it wasn't the only reason. The Big 12 Conference was one of the few conferences that did not share its revenues evenly until after Texas A&M left the conference. The University of Missouri also declared its intentions to leave the Big 12 Conference for the Southeastern Conference.

When the University of Pittsburgh and Syracuse University announced their intentions to leave the Big East Conference for the Atlantic Coast Conference, media noted ESPN's conflict of interest again.

Boston College University Athletic Director Gene DeFillippo was quoted on Boston.com as saying: "We always keep our television partners close to us. You don't get extra money for basketball. It's 85 percent football money. TV - ESPN - is the one who told us what to do. This was football; it had nothing to do with basketball." (Blaudschun, 2011b) Three days later, he recanted his statement in the same newspaper (Blaudschun, 2011a). Money and television connections play a significant role in conference selection.

INCREASES IN POPULARITY AND REVENUE

In 1982, CBS paid the NCAA \$48 million for the rights to broadcast its season ending men's basketball tournament, outbidding NBC which was also interested reaping the profits from the event. ("NCAA Men's Division I Basketball Championship," 2011). That same year, CBS televised Selection Sunday for the first time ("NCAA Men's Division I Basketball Championship," 2011). In 1983, the tournament expanded to 52 teams and 53 in 1984 (Wilner & Rappoport, 2012). ESPN still had the early round games. Fans were able to watch the entire tournament and this led to an explosion in the popularity of the game. (Freeman, 2001). More and more fans started playing tournament brackets and by 1985, when the tournament expanded to 64 teams, the NCAA Tournament bracket was common among fans (Wilner & Rappoport, 2012). CBS also signed a new \$96 million contract with the NCAA ("Rovell," 2005).

In 1988, CBS signed a \$165 million deal and in 1991, the deal grew larger, \$572 million over four years ("Rovell," 2005). The 1991 contract also eliminated ESPN from broadcasting NCAA Tournament games ("Rovell," 2005). CBS adopted a number of the methods used by ESPN, including cutting into games that were exciting or were getting ready to end and hosting a tournament central where one moderator could take the viewer to different venues ("Rovell," 2005). In 1996, the deal was \$1.7 billion for seven years and in 2004 the deal was \$5.9 billion over 11 years. CBS owned the rights to broadcast the tournament after the 2010 season. At that time, CBS was in the middle of a \$6 billion contract that ran through 2013, with an option for the NCAA to opt out of the tournament after 2010. The NCAA exercised that option and signed a new 14-year, \$10.8-billion deal with CBS and Turner Broadcasting Co. (NCAA, 2010). Games were placed on CBS, TNT, TBS and TRU TV. The money generated from the television rights goes to the conferences and universities represented in the tournament. NCAA-affiliated

conferences received \$168.4 million in television revenues from the 2009-2010 season (NCAA, 2011). That number represents 86 percent of the NCAA revenue for that year (NCAA, 2011).

CHAPTER 4

METHODS

No means exist for examining a direct cause and effect from media toward the members of the NCAA Tournament selection committee. At the same time, media play a role in influencing fans – and, possibly, the committee – through a number of methods. Media set the agenda in discussion of what teams should be thought of as viable candidates to qualify for the tournament. If SportsCenter places prominence on specific teams from certain conferences, viewers may be persuaded to view these teams more favorably. This research examined SportsCenter to find if there is an agenda-setting connection between SportsCenter and the sports press by asking this question: Does ESPN have an intermedia agenda-setting effect on regional newspapers across the United States with its national coverage of college basketball?

To test this question, four hypotheses were tested.

H1: An agenda-setting relationship exists between ESPN's coverage of NCAA basketball teams from the six power conferences and a group of regional newspapers concerning the NCAA Tournament bubble during the three weeks before the 2010 NCAA men's basketball tournament.

H2: An agenda-setting relationship exists between ESPN's coverage of NCAA basketball teams from the 25 other NCAA Division I college basketball conferences and a group of regional newspapers concerning the NCAA tournament bubble during the three weeks before the 2010 NCAA men's basketball tournament.

H3: An agenda-setting relationship exists between ESPN's coverage of NCAA basketball teams from the six power conferences and a group of regional newspapers concerning the NCAA Tournament bubble during the three weeks before the 2011 NCAA men's basketball tournament.

H4: An agenda-setting relationship exists between ESPN's coverage of NCAA basketball teams from the 25 other NCAA Division I college basketball conferences and a group of regional newspapers concerning the NCAA tournament bubble during the three weeks before the 2011 NCAA men's basketball tournament.

Coverage concerning the NCAA men's college basketball tournament receives the most attention in the final weeks leading up to selection. To obtain data for this study, a single episode of SportsCenter was recorded each morning in the three weeks leading up to the day the tournament was selected in 2010 and 2011. This accounted for 42 SportsCenter presentations. This number is not overly large, but the final weeks leading up to the NCAA selection are the most important. If the study were to extend the length of examination, the sample size would be larger, but actual coverage of the NCAA Tournament bubble would decrease. The three weeks before the tournament give quality observable data. Therefore, significance numbers may show high in some instances because of the smaller sample number of shows recorded.

Shows were recorded during the morning cycle of SportsCenters because that allowed the producers of the show time to update their information from the previous night. During each show, all mentions of NCAA men's college basketball (as they pertained to the upcoming NCAA Tournament) were coded. These mentions included game stories, graphics that mentioned a particular team, commentary from pundits about a team's chances for qualifying for the tournament, graphics that mentioned the team as one of the last four in or first four out of the

tournament (according to expert Joe Lunardi), and previews that stated the importance of a team winning an upcoming game to solidify their chances for qualifying as an at-large team.

In all, SportsCenter ran clips on 157 college basketball games in the 2010 season and 132 game clips from the 2011 season. Comments by sports pundits about the NCAA Tournament also were recorded and transcribed. During the 2010 season, Sunday SportsCenters ran for two hours, with copies of most games on each show. During the 2011 season, Sunday shows were just one hour. Conversations between pundits over the possibilities of certain teams qualifying for the tournament were transcribed, as well as graphics the show used to differentiate teams on the television screen.

At the same time, 13 newspapers were coded and examined for the same code words. The newspapers were large regional or metro newspapers that covered all sections of the United States. The newspapers selected were the Atlanta Constitution-Journal, the Boston Globe, the Chicago Sun-Times, the Dayton Daily News, the Denver Post, the Deseret Morning News, the Detroit News, the Houston Chronicle, Las Vegas Review-Journal, Orange County Register, Richmond Times-Dispatch, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and the Tulsa World.

The newspapers were coded in the same way as SportsCenter, with mentions of game stories, columns, and other commentary about teams and their chances of qualifying for the NCAA Tournament. To test for intercoder reliability, two newspapers and a 10 percent sample of SportsCenters were coded by two separate coders and compared to each other. Using Holsti's intercoder reliability formula for both newspapers and SportsCenters resulted in a measurement of .94 for newspapers and .91 for SportsCenters.

To test the hypotheses, a model was developed to examine the relationship between the daily newspapers and SportsCenter by day. The model function was to test for a correlation between SportsCenter coverage and newspaper coverage. The model worked as “newspaper today tested against newspaper yesterday over SportsCenter yesterday.” A linear regression was run using the current day’s newspaper results as the dependent variable, with the results from yesterday’s newspapers and yesterday’s SportsCenter as the independent variables. Tests were conducted for the 2010 and 2011 seasons.

FRAMING STUDY

Examining how SportsCenter frames schools from the six power conferences and the 25 other NCAA Division I men’s basketball conferences requires two studies. The first study examined the issue from a micro perspective, questioning how SportsCenter frames salience. In this case, two research questions were asked:

R-1: Do ESPN’s college-basketball related shows (SportsCenter and College GameDay) give more salience to specific issues that project average teams from the six major conferences as more deserving of the final NCAA Tournament bids than teams from the other 25 conferences?

R-2: Do ESPN’s college-basketball related shows (SportsCenter and College GameDay) frame issue attributes consistently when comparing teams from the six major conferences or teams from the other 25 conferences?

The second issue of study was a macro approach, asking whether SportsCenter framed bias into its coverage. This bias plays a role in fans’ perceptions of quality in conferences. If SportsCenter frames mid-level teams from the top six conferences as superior to top teams from the other 25 conferences, fans believe that those teams are better because of the conference in which they play.

Following two specific approaches by Entman (Entman, 2007), this research asked whether there is a content bias in SportsCenter's coverage of the NCAA Tournament bubble. To examine this issue, two research questions were asked:

R-3: Does ESPN's SportsCenter frame mid-level schools from the six major conferences in a way that makes them seem superior to top teams from the other 25 conferences in discussions about the NCAA Tournament's bubble?

R-4: Does ESPN's SportsCenter omit teams from the other 25 conferences, or frame them in a negative light, in discussions about the NCAA Tournament's bubble?

To obtain sufficient data for this study, a single episode of SportsCenter was recorded each morning in the three weeks leading up to the day the tournament was selected in 2010 and 2011. The three weeks before the tournament constitute the period of time when the NCAA Tournament bubble is discussed the most. This accounted for 42 SportsCenter presentations. Shows were recorded during the morning cycle of SportsCenter, because that gave the producers of the show time to update information from the previous night.

During each show, all mentions of NCAA men's college basketball (as they pertained to the upcoming NCAA Tournament) were coded. Mentions included these terms: game stories; graphics that mentioned a particular team; commentary from ESPN analysts about a team's chances for qualifying for the tournament and graphics that mentioned the team as one of the last four in or first four out of the tournament, according to ESPN "Bracketologist" Joe Lunardi; and previews that stated the importance of a team winning an upcoming game to solidify their chances for qualifying as an at-large team.

In all, SportsCenter ran clips on 157 college basketball games in the 2010 season and 132 game clips from the 2011 season. Comments about the NCAA Tournament by sports analysts, including Joe Lunardi, Doug Gottlieb, Jay Bilas, Dick Vitale, Hannah Storm, Hubert Davis, Digger Phelps, or Rece Davis also were recorded and transcribed. During the 2010 season, Sunday SportsCenters ran for two hours, with copies of most games on each show. During the 2011 season, Sunday shows ran for one hour. Conversations between pundits discussing the possibilities of certain teams qualifying for the tournament were transcribed, as well as the graphics the show used to differentiate teams on the television screen.

During the 2010-2011 season, the Saturday College GameDay show was recorded during the three weeks leading to the selection of teams as well. This show is geared toward college basketball coverage and spent more time with analysts discussing specific topics than viewers might see on SportsCenter.

POLITICAL ECONOMY

This study is designed in three sections. The first section takes a look at ESPN's hierarchy of influence in framing the narrative regarding the top six conferences compared to the other 25 conferences, and how it hires its on-air talent to reinforce this narrative. The study was conducted by gathering a list of ESPN's talent, and tracing their backgrounds and history to gain insight into their credentials. The information garnered during the research then was examined to determine what strong suits each of these analysts would have, and what possible inclinations they would have from their own experiences.

The second section examined revenue distributions from the NCAA to the 31 conferences in NCAA Division I. The section also examined how television revenues from major television corporations separate the six major conferences from the remaining 25 conferences, using

television revenues, budgets, and contracts from the six major conferences and the other 25 conferences. This separation becomes the demarcation line of power, with the six conferences controlling the power through mediated messages.

This section of the study also examined the television ratings connected with 2011 NCAA men's college basketball by comparing numbers from different websites that collect ratings numbers, including zap2it.com and sportsmediawatch.com. The 2010-2011 season was the first year that had ratings for every single tournament game available. This made it easier to examine how the network presented games, and what games CBS believed would have the highest ratings. The study also examined a week in 2012 that provided an insight into regular-season ratings for NCAA television games. The data also includes numbers from the 2006 NCAA national tournament, when George Mason University (a team from the Colonial Athletic Association) qualified for the NCAA Final Four, and using later information from news sources such as USA Today to show how those ratings led to assumptions about the impact of teams from outside of the top six conferences on the overall ratings of the NCAA Tournament.

The final section of this study examined how newspapers framed Butler in the week before the 2010 NCAA Final Four. Using the same newspapers that were used in the agenda-setting study⁹, a LexisNexis search determined how many times these newspapers mentioned the upcoming Final Four and what terms were used to describe Butler. Code words that set up possible frames were examined, including "Cinderella," "Hoosiers," "mid-major," "budget," and "ranked." The search also examined how many times stories described Butler players as possible

⁹ The Atlanta Constitution-Journal, the Boston Globe, the Chicago Tribune (instead of the Sun-Times), the Dayton Daily News, the Denver Post, the Deseret Morning News,

NBA players, because mentions of players who may play in the NBA are used to determine a team's talent level. The study then examined how these words were used in a qualitative fashion, including their tone, and how these frames were placed in relation to power relationships and a dominant narrative theme. Keeping in mind Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchy of influence, the study examined how so many stories were similar in nature to other stories.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS

AGENDA-SETTING

This study was conducted to establish a better understanding of how sports news flows from ESPN's SportsCenter to daily newspapers. Examining this flow provides input into the sports agenda for ESPN's SportsCenter. Concentrating on the NCAA Tournament, an entity that ESPN does not own broadcast rights, provides both a glimpse into ESPN's role as a sports journalism entity and a glimpse into its role as provider of sports entertainment or hype.

The first hypotheses tested whether an agenda-setting relationship existed between ESPN's SportsCenter coverage of the 2010 NCAA Tournament bubble and that of large regional and metro newspapers across the country (see Table 1). The linear regression tests showed a beta coefficient of 0.55, with significance of .03. This is a significant finding, and it suggests that there was a strong agenda-setting effect in coverage of the major conferences during the 2010 season from SportsCenter to the next day's newspaper. This supports H-1.

Coverage of schools from the other 25 NCAA Division I men's basketball conferences during the 2010 season was similar. The beta coefficient of those schools was 0.48, with significance of .03. Again, it was a significant finding and supported a strong agenda-setting effect in coverage of the other 25 conferences during the 2009-2010 men's basketball season.

Table 1, Beta coefficient results, 2010

2010 Results	Beta Coefficient	Significance
Six Power Conferences		
Yesterday's Newspaper	-0.15	0.54
Yesterday's SportsCenter	0.55	0.03
Other 25 Conferences		
Yesterday's Newspaper	0.33	0.12
Yesterday's SportsCenter	0.48	0.03

This confirmed H-2. Data supporting both H-1 and H-2 suggests that ESPN's SportsCenter played a significant role in setting the agenda for the 2009-2010 NCAA Tournament bubble.

The analysis of the period leading up to the 2011 NCAA men's basketball tournament was not as strong. The linear regression test of conferences in the six major conferences was .26 (see Table 2). This suggests that an agenda-setting effect appears to exist, but the variance is too great to place emphasis on this fact. Therefore, H-3 remains unconfirmed.

The results for the other 25 conferences in 2011 were even further apart. The beta coefficient was a -.2, with a significance of .42. These numbers were not consistent with the expected findings. This led to the rejection of H-4 according to this model.

Table 2: 2011 Beta Coefficient results

2011 Results	Beta Coefficients	Significance
Six Major Conferences		
Yesterday's Newspaper	-0.22	0.49
Yesterday's SportsCenter	0.26	0.42
Other 25 Conferences		
Yesterday's Newspaper	-0.18	0.63
Yesterday's SportsCenter	-0.2	0.42

FRAMING

FRAMING SALIENCE

This section examines how SportsCenter frames the importance of specific factors that relate to a team's selection into the NCAA Tournament as an at-large selection. A 10-person committee comprising school administrators, presidents, and athletic directors determines selection (J. Coleman & Lynch, 2009). Each committee member is given a report, called the "nitty-gritty report," that breaks down each team by factors such as its winning percentage, total wins, total non-conference wins, and road wins (B. J. Coleman et al., 2010). The report also places interest in the RPI, wins against teams in the RPI's top 25, wins against teams in the RPI's top 50, and wins against teams in the RPI's top 100 (B. J. Coleman et al., 2010). Finally, the

report examines total losses, total conference losses, total road losses, losses against teams in the RPI's top 25, losses against teams in the top 50, losses against teams in the top 100, and "bad losses," or losses against teams with an RPI of greater than 100 (B. J. Coleman et al., 2010).

The RPI is one of the factors that plays a role in selection to the NCAA Tournament by the committee but is a factor that slightly favors the schools from the 25 other conferences (B. J. Coleman et al., 2010). Most other factors concerning selection favor teams from the six conferences. A large number of teams from the six conferences consist of the "blue blood" programs (teams with tradition), and consistently top teams considered as "sure picks," or locks for selection into the NCAA Tournament. The fact that average teams from the six conferences get multiple opportunities to play these teams, especially at home, gives these teams an advantage in most other factors concerning selection into the NCAA Tournament. Therefore, this section examines how SportsCenter and College GameDay frame these selection tools in their shows.

SportsCenter used words like RPI, record against the RPI top 50, strength of schedule, key wins and conference as a means of separating teams from each other. Most segments had graphics that showed the teams' RPIs, won-lost record and other factors. When examining how often analysts used these words or phrases in their actual break down of teams, table 3 provides some information.

Using Entman's definition of salience "making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful or memorable to audiences" (Entman, 1993), the research examined which issues used by the NCAA to select teams for the NCAA Tournament were given more salience by SportsCenter and College GameDay. On February 24, 2010, for example, the University

Table 3: Attributes mentioned by analysts in SportsCenter conversations, 2010, 2011.

Key words or phrases	Six Conferences	Other 25	Total
	<i>2010</i>		
RPI	7	2	9
Vs. RPI top 50	7	4	11
Key wins	16	5	21
SOS	3	0	3
Conference	7	9	16
Totals	40	20	60
	<i>2011</i>		
RPI	0	0	0
Vs. RPI Top 50	7	2	9
Key wins	1	5	6
Conference	0	3	3
SOS	3	3	6
Total	11	13	24

Source: SportsCenter

of Illinois defeated the University of Michigan 51-44.

“So, with 10 losses on the year, but they do have 10 wins in conference play. Is this going to be enough to get Illinois into the Dance? They’ve got an RPI and a strength of schedule outside the top 50, a couple of no-nos there. However, they do have wins over Vanderbilt, at Wisconsin and Michigan State at home. Three very impressive wins help their chances” (“SportsCenter,” 2010a).

A graphic displayed Illinois with an RPI of 65 and a strength of schedule at 68. The announcer, Hannah Storm, mentioned the wins against teams from the top 50 and placed an emphasis on those, calling them “impressive” and saying the wins improved Illinois’ chances of qualifying for the tournament. The announcer never talked about the two bad losses on Illinois’ résumé (to teams with poor RPIs), and downplayed the significance of an RPI of 65, calling it a “no-no.” The tone used to describe “no-no” was glib; it was passed over as something not as important as the big wins Illinois recorded.

The very next segment was a loss by the University of Northern Iowa. Northern Iowa lost to the University of Evansville, and Storm said:

“Despite the loss, Northern Iowa has had a fine season at 24-4, 14-3 in the Missouri Valley. They won the regular season in the Valley, one would think though they would have to win the tournament to qualify for the Dance. They have wins over Boston College, Sienna and Iowa, but they do have some bad losses, not only this one but also against DePaul” (“SportsCenter,” 2010b).

Northern Iowa had an RPI of 22. The team was 3-1 against teams from the RPI top 50, and this was presented to the viewers in the graphic that followed the comment. Storm never mentioned Northern Iowa’s RPI. She concentrated on Northern Iowa’s wins over top 50 teams and concentrated on the bad losses as a way to make the résumé seem worse.

The two segments were similar in coverage, but not similar in approach. The analysts emphasized the positive with their coverage of the University of Illinois, concentrating on the good wins and downplaying issues such as bad losses and a poor RPI. Minutes later, the coverage changed. Storm emphasized the bad losses while minimizing the positive issues of Northern Iowa’s résumé.

On February 25, 2010, the SportsCenter segment focused on San Diego State University after it lost to Brigham Young University at Brigham Young. Analyst Doug Gottlieb compared San Diego State, a team from outside of the top six conferences, to the University of Notre Dame and the University of Minnesota:

“The difference between SDSU and Notre Dame and Minnesota is with the 2-6 against the RPI Top 50, they won’t get a chance to get another top 50 win until the Mountain West Tournament. So they’ll probably have to get to the finals of the Mountain West, if not win the Mountain West, to get into the NCAA Tournament” (“SportsCenter,” 2010a).

The graphic showed San Diego State with an RPI of 38. Notre Dame’s RPI was 81. RPI was not mentioned in the discussion about San Diego State’s chances, only the team’s results against teams from the RPI top 50. The discussion also explained that teams from the other 25

conferences didn't have the opportunities to play against as many teams from the RPI top 50, reinforcing the concept that results against the RPI top 50 qualify a team for the NCAA Tournament as an at-large team.

On March 3, 2010, Marquette defeated Louisville 69-48. Gottlieb said this about the two teams' chances:

“Marquette, the numbers aren't great versus the top 50, but a win over Xavier, a win over Georgetown, every game is close and then they dominate Louisville. I think they're in. Louisville has two great things going for it: They sweep UConn, but UConn might not be in the NCAA Tournament, so that might not look so good. They have a magnificent win over Syracuse, but they're 3-6 vs. the RPI top 50. They have bad losses to Western Carolina and Charlotte” (“SportsCenter,” 2010f).

The comments focused on how the teams competed against other teams in the RPI top 50.

The two teams' RPIs were not mentioned in this clip. The graphic displayed during the story showed Marquette with an RPI of 51 and Louisville with an RPI of 32. The graphics also had the teams' records, their conference records, their strength of schedule, and their records against the RPI top 50. The graphics, where the RPI usually was mentioned, contained a number of statistics for the viewer to examine. The RPI was just one. The conversations never mentioned the RPI. Prominence was given to their records against teams from the RPI top 50. Since the best teams in the nation and in the RPI play in the six major conferences, average teams from these conferences get multiple chances to play those teams. Each win is given salience. Since teams from the other 25 conferences don't get as many chances, they don't have the opportunities to play as often against teams from the top RPI top 50, although many of these teams from smaller conferences are ranked in the RPI top 50.

An example can be found in the March 4 SportsCenter. The University of Alabama-Birmingham lost to Memphis. Alabama-Birmingham had an RPI of 42, but Gottlieb commented on the loss:

“I think UAB was a team that Joe Lunardi had in, but the problem with UAB is they’re just 1-2 versus RPI top 50 teams, and there just aren’t enough quality wins. Where they sit now is clearly out, but they could be in if they beat the conference champion, UTEP, in their last game. I think UAB has the opportunity, almost like a Big East team, where they have ample opportunities at the end” (“SportsCenter,” 2010g).

Gottlieb never mentioned the University of Alabama-Birmingham’s ranking inside the RPI top 50. That was not relevant to his narrative. What was relevant was the team’s record against other teams from the top 50. The fact that Alabama-Birmingham earned a top 50 ranking was irrelevant. Alabama-Birmingham’s record against other teams with that ranking became the important issue. Also, the announcer mentioned that Alabama-Birmingham had an opportunity, like a Big East team, to play teams like that at the end of the season. Not only is the RPI’s importance downgraded; the fact that Alabama-Birmingham is not in the Big East is subtly brought up, placing importance on the Big East as a superior conference and with the record against the RPI top 50.

Compare this to a Big East team such as Seton Hall. On March 5, Seton Hall defeated Rutgers 85-74. SportsCenter announcers said this about Seton Hall:

“Seton Hall may only be 17-11, but they do have quality wins over Pitt, Louisville and at Cornell. They do not have a loss against any team outside the RPI top 75” (“SportsCenter,” 2010g).

Seton Hall’s RPI of 56 was presented in a graphic during the story. Again, the graphic contained full information about Seton Hall. The RPI was just another part of the graphic. What is presented as important is how Seton Hall competed against other teams with higher RPIs. Another thing that was not mentioned in the story, but was available on the graphic, was that Seton Hall was 3-9 against the RPI Top 50. The quality wins were emphasized during the

conversation, but the losses were not mentioned. The conversation did mention that Lunardi had the team listed as out of the tournament.

SportsCenter took the same approach the next year. On February 25, 2011, the SportsCenter announcer said to Gottlieb about St. Mary's and Gonzaga:

“A lot of questions about whether the WCC can get two teams in the tournament. Both have strength of schedules in the 120s and one win against the RPI top 50.” Gottlieb replied, “I do agree, but they'll probably see each other again in the championship game of their tournament. If they do that, then they'll both get in” (“SportsCenter,” 2011b).

This followed previous patterns from the year before. Both Gonzaga and St. Mary's played in conferences outside of the top six. The frame concentrated on the negative – the two teams' strength of schedule – and the fact that each team only had one win against RPI top 50 teams. Gottlieb, while saying that both teams would probably qualify for the tournament, placed a condition on his approval: if both teams made it to their conference's tournament championship game.

On March 8, 2011, Lunardi was speaking about the Big East expecting 11 teams to qualify for the tournament. During this conversation, he mentioned Marquette.

“Marquette, they are the 11 team by rank, not by seeds,” Lunardi said. “Terrific strength of schedule and four wins against the RPI top 25, not the RPI top 50.” (SportsCenter, March 8, 2011).

The graphic displayed gave the viewer more information. Marquette's RPI was 65. The team had four wins against the RPI top 25 but was 4-11 against the RPI top 50. This was not part of the conversation, because it did not fit with the overall narrative. The narrative concentrated on why Marquette deserved to be in the tournament. Prominence was placed on its wins against teams from the RPI top 25. Marquette's overall RPI, and its record against the RPI top 50, were not mentioned. Salience was placed on wins by a Big East team. Losses, and the RPI, were given less importance.

On March 9, 2011, Gottlieb talked about two teams from the six conferences: Villanova from the Big East, and the University of Colorado from the Big 12:

“Villanova, on the numbers, you would be hard put to put them in versus, say, a Colorado right now. The logical reason is, with the exception of the loss to VCU, they were stellar – SOS was good, they played a decent nonconference schedule. Didn’t play a lot outside of Philly, in fact, they didn’t play a single game outside of Philly. They’ve lost 10 of their last 15.

“Look at Colorado. On the pure empirical data, the numbers are far weaker. But they’re 5-6 against the RPI top 50, and they have a road win at K-State. If Colorado were to win two more times, which means another big win against K-State, I would switch them over Villanova” (“SportsCenter,” 2011b).

Gottlieb never mentioned the teams’ RPI numbers. Villanova had an RPI of 31, while Colorado had an RPI of 76. What was given prominence was wins over quality teams, with “quality” being defined as teams from the top six conferences. In this instance, Gottlieb was concentrating on bad losses by Villanova and wins over a specific team by Colorado.

College GameDay was more direct in its framing of the RPI. On March 5, 2011, the College GameDay analysts Digger Phelps, Hubert Davis, and Jay Bilas answered a question from moderator Rece Davis:

Rece Davis: “Let’s look at these bubble teams right now and tell me what is the most important criteria to try to differentiate between them.”

Hubert Davis: The reason I don’t like the RPI is it’s who you play and who you beat and how your opponents play, and I don’t think you should be judged on how your opponents play – and the strength of schedule is a byproduct of the RPI. For me, how I evaluate teams is, I watch them play and then I look at their schedule. Take Alabama. I’ve seen Alabama play. I look at them and I say, ‘I think they’re an NCAA Tournament team.’ Then I look at their résumé and I look at their schedule. Their nonconference résumé is weak, in conference they play in the SEC West, and they have a winning record versus the SEC East. That’s how I evaluate whether a team should go to the NCAA Tournament or not.”

Phelps: “Last week we saw Gene Smith, the athletic director at Ohio State who is the chair of the Division I basketball committee. He came down and said, to him, it’s the ‘eye test,’ and I agree with him. I want to see teams, who they’re playing, who they beat and their personnel. Can this team win a first-round matchup? “Let’s talk about Colorado for a second. Colorado is at 7-8 in the conference, they play Nebraska at home today. If they beat Nebraska they’re 8-8, and that means .500. But they’ve beaten Texas, K-State twice, they’ve beaten Missouri, and this is

a very dangerous team that is a bubble team that I think should get in because they could win a first-round matchup.”

Rece Davis: “Jay, how do you balance this ‘eye test’ theory against ‘you are what you are,’ and what your record and the formula says you are?”

Bilas: “It’s both. You have to do comparative analysis with other teams. When you get to the bubble, you have to compare those teams. What I like to do is rank them without basis of the paper first. I’ve seen them play, here’s who I think are the best teams. Then you look at the data. I think RPI stands for one thing: ‘really poor indicator.’ I think the RPI tells us absolutely nothing. They call it an organizational tool, but what it is, is a tool for really weak minds.

“What this stuff does is it organizes stuff in a very formulaic way. I love the bracketology stuff, but the truth is this couldn’t be easier. When we get to Selection Sunday, you can’t miss. Every one of these guys, Jerry Palm, Joey Lunardi, it’s always 64 out of 65, this year it will be 67 out of 68. You cannot miss because it’s so formulaic”(“College GameDay,” 2011b).

Davis and Phelps both touted the “eye test,” a factor that does not exist in the NCAA committee’s nitty-gritty report. The eye test consists of analysts or committee members selecting a team for the tournament because that team looks like an NCAA Tournament team. Few people who cover college basketball have seen all the teams play. Many have seen all the teams from the six conferences play because of their prominence on television, but few have seen all the top teams from the other 25 conferences play – and, if they have, they have seen them only one or two times. This makes selecting teams by the eye test a difficult task. Also, whether a team looks like an NCAA Tournament-caliber team does not mean that team played like an NCAA Tournament-caliber team through the course of a season.

Bilas expressed his displeasure of the RPI, calling it a “really poor indicator” and a tool for “really weak” minds. The RPI is the one tool that rates teams from the other 25 conferences with the same criteria used for the top six conferences (B. J. Coleman et al., 2010). His negative comments could serve as a reason to disregard the RPI as a tool.

On March 12, Bilas again argued against the RPI. The topic of conversation was the NCAA Tournament bubble, and Davis placed a graphic on the screen that had the following information:

Harvard, RPI 32, record versus RPI top 50, 1-4.
 Virginia Tech, RPI 61, record versus RPI top 50, 2-4.
 Colorado, RPI 65, record versus RPI top 50, 6-7
 USC, RPI 67, record versus RPI top 50, 5-5.
 Penn State, RPI 42, record versus RPI top 50, 4-9 (“College GameDay,” 2011b).

Rece Davis asked Bilas, Phelps and Hubert Davis this question: “Look at Harvard, with an RPI of 32, versus the last four in?” (“College GameDay,” 2011b)

Bilas said:

“What this shows you is that the RPI is an absolute joke. Harvard is 32 in the RPI, and yet they’re not even in the discussion of getting in the tournament as an at-large. Their one RPI top-50 win is over Princeton. Michigan is a team that is firmly in the field. Their best win? Harvard.

“Harvard has beaten Boston College and Colorado, and they’re not even in the discussion. Yet Harvard and Princeton, their RPI numbers are better than any of the teams they’ve listed there.

“The committee has told us for years that the RPI is a blunt instrument and not a precision tool. Why are we using a blunt instrument? Let’s use a precision tool. We’re organizing all of our information by the RPI, the blunt instrument – and two of the teams, and two of the teams that are above all the other bubble teams in this discussion, are not even in the discussion” (“College GameDay,” 2011b).

Harvard was not mentioned as an at-large possibility by the analysts on SportsCenter.

Harvard was mentioned on GameDay for the sole purpose of explaining why the team did not deserve to be in the tournament. Harvard plays in a conference that traditionally gets one bid. Harvard had a better RPI than Colorado, a team that Harvard beat. Yet the analysts from both SportsCenter and GameDay never considered Harvard as a possibility – and, at the same time, argued for Colorado’s inclusion.

Why was Colorado not mentioned as a quality win for Harvard? Colorado was not a top-50 RPI team. Harvard’s win over Colorado was not considered a quality win. But it was

Colorado that pundits such as Bilas and Phelps touted, using the “eye test” and wins over Kansas State as their reason for inclusion. When the analysts used such a negative narrative to describe the RPI, the result eroded the importance placed on the RPI as a tool for selection. Thus the one tool that presented the teams from the other 25 conferences in the same way as the teams from the six conferences had its importance diminished. Because Colorado did not qualify as a “quality” team, according to the standards the analysts used to define quality, Harvard’s win over Colorado did not count as a quality win that could have put Harvard in the discussion for the NCAA at-large tournament. So Harvard was not mentioned on SportsCenter, the RPI was diminished – and the analysts promoted the University of Colorado.

It wasn’t just Bilas who commented during the segment. Phelps and Hubert Davis added to Bilas’ message:

Phelps: “I think Gene Smith said it when we had him in an interview about a week ago, he is the athletic director at Ohio State and he’s the Division I selection chair, and when it comes down to what he thinks it’s all about: ‘eye test.’ I really think the RPI and all this other stuff we’re looking at, I really think the RPI is going to take a look, how good is this team, what’s the personnel, how have they been playing lately. Take a look at Michigan State. If they were in any other conference, or if any other team had a record like that, they’re out. But they pass the ‘eye test’ ” (“College GameDay,” 2011b).

Phelps returned to the “eye test” as a tool for selecting which teams deserved to be included in the NCAA Tournament but also added a comment about Michigan State University. The team was struggling at the time, with a record of just over .500. At the same time, the school’s reputation earned over many years – and the fact that Michigan State played in the Big Ten Conference – played a role in its seeming security as an NCAA Tournament team. Phelps called it the “eye test,” but much of that test dealt with familiarity with a particular school.

Hubert Davis added:

“When I evaluate teams, I don’t look at the RPI. The RPI is who you play, who you beat and how your opponents played, and I’ve said before I don’t think you should be judged on who your opponents play or your strength of schedule because it’s a

byproduct of the RPI. I think the correct way to evaluate a team is to look at the schedule, who you play and who you beat, and look at the teams in terms of the ‘eye test.’ ”

Rece Davis: “Let me play devil’s advocate here. If you do that, how do you determine whether a schedule is any good or not?”

Hubert Davis: “We know what teams are good or not” (“College GameDay,” 2011b).

Again, Davis’ denigrated the RPI and highlighted the significance of the “eye test.” This method of selection works only for those who have seen teams a number of times. Since teams from the top six conferences have most of their games scheduled on ESPN, Davis was framing the argument by increasing the salience of the “eye test,” a factor that would serve to enhance ESPN’s standing since it covers so many games, and decreasing the prominence of the RPI, the one tool that fairly evaluates teams from outside of the six conferences.

Finding certain parts of the process and making them seem more or less important to the viewers was only one part of the way SportsCenter framed the NCAA Tournament bubble. The other part concerned how ESPN framed the entire process, including the teams. The show used narratives that enhanced the reputation of certain teams or conferences, and it presented a negative frame for teams from outside of the top six conferences.

FRAMING BIAS

After examining the data for patterns in its coverage of the NCAA Tournament bubble, four frames became evident. They were:

1. Teams searching for one of the final at-large bids from the top six conferences became the dominant frame of the NCAA Tournament bubble discussion. Teams from the top six conferences were consistently placed in a narrative about their chances for selection, were examined frequently (both positively and negatively), and were framed as superior to teams from smaller conferences – and deserving of more attention.
2. That narratives describing teams from smaller conferences were inconsistent, negative or absent, and frames were used that marked these teams as inferior to schools from the top six conferences.

3. That the conference teams played in was important, even though that fact is not supposed to be a factor in the NCAA selection committee's decision.
4. Teams from smaller conferences that lost in their conference tournaments and were placed in the at-large pool were described as "bid thieves" – teams from smaller conferences possibly stealing bids from more deserving schools.

The first frame dealt with establishing the viability of mediocre or middle-of-the-pack teams from the top six conferences as superior to top teams from the other 25 conferences. This frame serves as the dominant frame when examining coverage of the NCAA men's basketball bubble. Viewers assume that the sixth-place team from the Big Ten Conference should be placed ahead of a conference champion that lost in its conference tournament when it comes to selecting the final teams selected into the NCAA Tournament. They do this because a narrative has supported this assumption for decades.

This frame is presented in numerous ways. One method is repeated coverage of teams from these six conferences compared to the other 25 conferences. SportsCenter's coverage of teams from the top six conferences far outnumbered those of teams from the other 25 conferences. In 2010, of 157 game stories covered, 71.3 percent were about teams from the top six conferences. In 2011, of the 135 games covered, 106 of them, or 78.5 percent, were from the six major conferences. While this number has some viability when considering agenda-setting, it also is important in establishing specific frames or narrative arcs for stories. The fact that these teams are mentioned so often does not just set an agenda; it establishes a specific narrative when SportsCenter covers college basketball. That narrative concentrates on the teams from the top six conferences, and not just on teams ranked in the top 25. When specific teams were identified as "bubble" teams, SportsCenter concentrated its coverage on teams from the top six conferences. During the 2009-2010 season, the University of Illinois received 27 mentions in SportsCenter,

including coverage of all of its games. The University of Minnesota, another Big Ten team, also received plenty of coverage, finishing with 24 mentions on SportsCenter. The number of times these teams were mentioned established these teams as viable bubble teams.

On February 24, 2010, SportsCenter ran a preview of the game between the University of Illinois and the University of Michigan. “The bubble this year is really gigantic as we head to March. Sitting squarely atop that, Demetri McCamey and his Fighting Illini, facing Michigan” (“SportsCenter,” 2010b). The University of Illinois won the game 51-44, and Hannah Storm, the announcer, remarked:

“So, with 10 losses on the year, but they do have 10 wins in conference play. Is this going to be enough to get Illinois to the Dance? They’ve got an RPI (Ratings Percentage Index) and a strength of schedule outside the top 50, a couple of no-nos there, however, they do have wins over Vanderbilt, at Wisconsin and Michigan State at home, three very impressive wins to help their chances at home” (“SportsCenter,” 2010b).

A graphic popped up with the University of Illinois résumé. The graphic included the team’s RPI of 65, strength of schedule of 68, and its record against teams from the RPI top 50.

On March 3, the University of Illinois lost to Ohio State University 73-57. Analyst Doug Gottlieb said this about the University of Illinois:

“They were swept by Ohio State; more troubling is the home loss instead of the loss at Ohio State. Look at the inside RPI number, 73, hanging on by just a thread, but I believe Illinois has played itself out, losing four of its last five” (“SportsCenter,” 2010f).

The graphic showed Illinois with an 18-12 record and an RPI that had dropped from 65 to 72. On March 8, SportsCenter reported on the University of Illinois’ loss to the University of Wisconsin. After the game, the graphic showed Illinois with an 18-13 record, an RPI of 72 and a note that said, “(Joe) Lunardi says: IN” (“SportsCenter,” 2010b). The frame was established by

repetition. The importance of this coverage relied less on the University of Illinois' credentials to be in the tournament than on the constant discussion of Illinois' chances of making the tournament. The frame placed the University of Illinois on the bubble and considered the University of Illinois as a legitimate bubble team.

SportsCenter framed the University of Minnesota the same way. On February 25, 2010, the University of Minnesota lost a game to Purdue. The announcers turned their focus to Minnesota. Gottlieb had this to say about the University of Minnesota:

“Minnesota is out. They have a schedule they could win out, and if they do win out, including at Illinois this weekend, you could see them hopping back on the bubble. As we go through the litany of games last night where teams needed to win, they simply lost. The bubble has expanded. It will contract again later at some point, but right now it's expanding. Minnesota is out right now, but they could play themselves back in later” (“SportsCenter,” 2010c, p. February 25).

After defeating the University of Illinois, Minnesota started getting daily mentions as one of the first four teams out in Lunardi's “Bracketology” session. This happened for three days until, on March 3, the University of Minnesota lost to the University of Michigan 83-55. Gottlieb, after saying that he believed the University of Illinois was out of the tournament, said this about Minnesota: “I'm not even going to bring up their résumé. They're no longer under consideration. Even if they made a late run to the Big Ten Championship game, I don't think they'd make it” (“SportsCenter,” 2010f, p. March 3).

The University of Illinois and the University of Minnesota were mentioned together. The two teams reside in the same conference, and this became important because the show consistently presented the two as a tandem, playing for one spot in the NCAA Tournament. This followed an established narrative. The two teams were from the same conference: the Big Ten

Conference. This is important because conference affiliation is not supposed to play a role in selection for the tournament (B. J. Coleman et al., 2010).

On March 13, Minnesota defeated Michigan State University 72-67. The game story ran right before the game story that showed the University of Illinois defeating Wisconsin. Afterward, the two teams' NCAA Tournament résumés were placed side by side on the television screen. Minnesota had a record of 20-12, an RPI of 69 and a 4-6 record against the top 50. The University of Illinois had a 19-13 record, an RPI of 73 and a 5-8 record against the top 50 (ESPN, 2010, March 13). The announcer said: "Our resident bracketologist, Joe Lunardi, has Illinois in and Minnesota one of the first four out" ("SportsCenter," 2010d, pp. March, 13).

The following day, the University of Minnesota defeated Purdue 69-42 while the University of Illinois lost to Ohio State University 88-81 in overtime. Again, a graphic compared the two teams side by side on the television screen. Minnesota had a 21-12 record, an RPI of 60 and a 5-6 record against teams from the top 50. Illinois had a 19-14 record, an RPI of 75 and a 5-9 record against teams in the top 50. The announcer reported:

"Both went in Saturday on the bubble, but they've switched places. Joe Lunardi, you know his success rate, has Minnesota as one of the final two teams in and has Illinois as one of the first three teams out" ("SportsCenter," 2010h, p. March 14).

The University of Illinois was reported as a candidate for the NCAA Tournament until selection day. The team had an RPI in the 70s and 14 losses (including six of its final seven games) but was mentioned 27 times on ESPN as a viable tournament candidate. The University of Minnesota had an RPI of 60, 12 losses and was 9-9 in conference play. These two teams were prototypical middling major basketball teams. Combined, they received 51 mentions as possible NCAA Tournament teams. The narrative centered on these teams as ones viewers should

consider as viable NCAA Tournament teams. Negative mentions with pundits declaring their chances in a negative light served a purpose of keeping the teams in the conversation.

SportsCenter analysts framed both squads as prototypical bubble teams.

The same frame was prevalent during the 2011 run of SportsCenters. The teams that received the most coverage from SportsCenter in the weeks leading up to the NCAA Tournament were the University of Colorado (16 mentions in either game stories, résumés, pundit discussions or mentions as one of the final four in or first four teams out of the tournament), Virginia Tech University (14 total mentions), the University of Alabama (16 mentions), and the University of Georgia (12 mentions). The emphasis was on teams from the six major conferences who had questionable résumés. The fates of these schools, and their viability as NCAA Tournament teams, became the dominant frame when reporting on the NCAA Tournament bubble.

Simultaneously, SportsCenter framed schools from outside of the top six conferences as inferior, or ignored them completely. The 2011 coverage of St. Mary's University, a school from the West Coast Conference that lost its tournament championship game to the University of Gonzaga March 7, provides an example. On March 8, ESPN's Lunardi reported that St. Mary's was going to make the NCAA Tournament as an at-large team. But after the March 8 story, St. Mary's was mentioned just once as an at-large possibility: on March 13, the day of the tournament selection, Lunardi said they would qualify as an at-large bid again that day. St. Mary's did not make the tournament as an at-large bid. No pundits made a case for, or against, St. Mary's in those five days. St. Mary's did not receive the constant attention that the University of Colorado or Virginia Tech University received. St. Mary's, a top team from a conference outside of the top six, was almost ignored by the pundits. At the same time, teams such as the University of Colorado and Virginia Tech University remained in the public's eye. Omission is

an important part of framing salience. Leaving St. Mary's out of the discussion kept a viable team from outside of the top six conferences outside of the at-large conversation.

SportsCenter concentrated on the University of Colorado during the 2010-2011 season. The University of Colorado defeated Kansas State University three times during the course of the season. Pundits pointed to those wins as proof that Colorado deserved to be in the tournament. On March 9, 2011, ESPN commentator Doug Gottlieb compared Villanova, a team from the Big East Conference that fell from 15th in the nation to out of the Associated Press rankings after losing 10 of its last 15 games, to the University of Colorado.

“Villanova, on the numbers, you would be hard to put them in versus, say, a Colorado right now. The logical reason is, with the exception of the loss to VCU, they were stellar. Strength of schedule was good; they played a decent non-conference schedule. They didn't play a lot of road games outside of Philly – actually, they didn't play one. They've lost 10 of their last 15 games. “Look at Colorado. On pure empirical data, their numbers are far weaker. But 5-6 against RPI top 50, plus they have a road win at K-State. If Colorado were to win two more times, which means another big win against K-State, I would switch to them over Villanova” (“SportsCenter,” 2011c, p. March 11).

Both of these schools had negatives that could have turned committee members against them. Gottlieb concentrated on the aspects that could get them into the tournament. These teams were deemed as natural candidates for selection into the tournament. Compare this to the 2010 treatment of the Missouri Valley Conference's Northern Iowa University. Northern Iowa University was ranked 22nd in the nation in late February 2010, when it lost a road game at the University of Evansville. The loss was Northern Iowa's fourth of the season. Said ESPN announcer Storm:

“Northern Iowa has had a fine season at 24-4, 14-3 in the Missouri Valley. They won the regular season in the Valley. One would think, though, that they would have to win the (Missouri Valley Conference) tournament. They have wins over Boston College, Sienna and Iowa, but they do have some bad losses – not only this

one against Evansville, but also against DePaul”(“SportsCenter,” 2010c, February 23).

The University of Northern Iowa was being held to a higher standard than Villanova or the University of Colorado. The consistent narrative when discussing the tournament bubble was to emphasize the positive in the six major conferences while mentioning the negatives. At the same time, SportsCenter emphasized the negative in teams from the other 25 conferences and mentioned the positive.

In the 2009-2010 season, the University of Rhode Island finished the regular season with a record of 23-9 and an RPI of 40, the lowest RPI ranking of any team that did not make the tournament. The University of Rhode Island was listed as one of the first four in or last four out for nearly the entire three weeks before the tournament, and it had 21 mentions on SportsCenter, but few were in the form of discussions. Most mentions came in the form of the “Last Four In, First Four Out” graphics that played daily on the show. When the University of Rhode Island was discussed, the conversation was negative.

ESPN Game Day analysts Jay Bilas, Digger Phelps and Hubert Davis talked with ESPN’s Rece Davis about the University of Rhode Island, San Diego State University and the University of Connecticut on the March 6 SportsCenter broadcast. The graphics showed the University of Connecticut with a 17-13 overall record and 7-10 in Big East Conference play, the University of Rhode Island with a 21-7 record and 9-6 in the Atlantic Ten Conference, and San Diego State with a 21-8 record and 10-5 in the Mountain West Conference. The analysts talked about the team they would choose, and Hubert Davis said this of Rhode Island:

Hubert Davis: “The top three teams in the Atlantic 10, the ones that should be in the tournament are Xavier, Richmond and Temple. Rhode Island hasn’t beaten any of those teams. There is no way they should be in the tournament.”

Rece Davis: “Why not San Diego State?”

Hubert Davis: “They haven’t played a ranked opponent, they haven’t beaten a ranked opponent, and they are 1-4 against the top two teams in the Mountain West Conference.”

Jay Bilas: “They did beat New Mexico, and that’s a really good win. That’s a top-10 team. They’re 7-7 on the road, and they’re 2-5 against the top 50. They just don’t have enough quality wins to get them in on paper now. You could look at them and say, ‘I’ve seen San Diego State play, and they’re a pretty good team.’ I think UConn’s better” (“SportsCenter,” 2010e, p. March 6).

The exchange establishes a specific frame. Both the University of Rhode Island and San Diego State University had stellar records, low RPIs and quality wins, but both were framed as inferior when compared to a University of Connecticut team that had a losing record in its own conference.

Lunardi compared the University of Rhode Island to the University of Minnesota during his closing segment on March 13, 2010:

“Let’s focus on the last team in the field, Rhode Island, and the last team out, Minnesota. The Rams will be going against A-10 champion Temple in the semifinals. But if Temple wins, I don’t think Rhode Island will be happy with their result; they’ll be out of the tournament. Looking at Minnesota, the Golden Gophers get Purdue, a favorable draw after the injury to Robbie Hummel. A win should put Minnesota into the tournament after a very inconsistent year for coach Tubby Smith” (SportsCenter, 2010, March 13).

Lunardi framed the University of Minnesota – a middle-of-the-road Big Ten team that was no better than .500 in its conference and with an RPI of 60 – as superior to a team with single-digit losses and an RPI at least 20 points higher. The University of Minnesota was going to flip-flop with the University of Illinois if it lost, but if Illinois won and Minnesota won, it was a mid-major that did not deserve to qualify for the NCAA Tournament. The University of Rhode Island, meanwhile, was held to a higher standard. SportsCenter reporters said the team had to win its conference semifinal and advance to the championship game to have a chance of qualifying for the NCAA Tournament. The quality of the conference becomes the deciding factor in ESPN’s frame instead of the quality of the team. The University of Rhode Island is framed as inferior to

either Minnesota or Illinois because of the two Big Ten schools' conference affiliation. The quality of the team is not as important. Rhode Island is held to a higher standard to compete in the NCAA Tournament because of its conference affiliation. Teams from the top six conferences are mentioned more often, and in a positive light. If a team from outside of the top six conferences does not clearly deserve to be in the field, it will be ignored or framed negatively, while the attention instead is focused on questionable teams from the top six conferences.

This difference in how teams are covered and framed by SportsCenter becomes clearer when examining how SportsCenter covered the final four teams in the 2010 and 2011 NCAA Tournament. The final four teams selected into the 2010-2011 NCAA Tournament were the University of Alabama-Birmingham, Virginia Commonwealth University, the University of Southern California and Clemson University. This is known because the 2011 NCAA Tournament went from 65 to 68 teams and the final four at-large selections played in an opening round game, with the winners advancing as 11 seeds or 12 seeds. Teams left out of the tournament that had an argument for being in the tournament were St. Mary's University, the University of Colorado, Virginia Tech University and Harvard.

The University of Alabama-Birmingham entered with a 22-8 record and an RPI of 31. The team was the regular-season champion of Conference USA but was not mentioned as a possible at-large bid on SportsCenter in the three weeks preceding the NCAA Tournament. The team was never mentioned as a possible NCAA Tournament team by anyone on the show. SportsCenter pundits ignored the team until it was selected. The same can be said for Virginia Commonwealth University, which entered the NCAA Tournament with a 23-11 record and an RPI of 49. This team was mentioned on SportsCenter, but the mentions came from the point of view of Old Dominion University. On March 7, the day of Virginia Commonwealth University's

game with Old Dominion University in the Colonial Athletic Association's tournament championship game, SportsCenter's Lunardi said this about Virginia Commonwealth University: "The real game with bubble implications is VCU versus Old Dominion in the Colonial championship game. A win by VCU could give the CAA three bids for the first time in its history" ("SportsCenter," 2011a).

A day later, after Old Dominion University won, the comment before the game clip was: "Lots of teams around the land are big fans of Old Dominion. If Virginia Commonwealth got a win, a lot of people thinking that could shrink the bubble" (SportsCenter, 2011, March 8).

If Virginia Commonwealth had won that game, they would have been described as a "bid thief" – a team that took bids from more deserving teams. The SportsCenter pundits never mentioned Virginia Commonwealth as a possible NCAA Tournament team. This includes no mentions by a pundit saying the team was not worthy. These two teams were never on SportsCenter's radar. Despite stellar records and strong RPIs, the pundits never mentioned them as possibilities for the NCAA Tournament.

At the same time, Clemson received multiple mentions on SportsCenter, including Lunardi's March 13 description:

"Clemson and Virginia Tech also have uneven résumés. Virginia Tech seems to be in this position almost every year, sorry to say for the Hokie fans. But I do think that both of these ACC schools will make it" (ESPN, 2011, March 13).

The University of Southern California was 19-14, with an RPI of 66, and Clemson University was 21-11, with an RPI of 57 (RPI, 2011). The coverage of the University of Southern California was particularly interesting. On March 7, Lunardi mentioned the team in his "in or out" section, declaring them out but making the comment that the team was "an interesting team sneaking into the conversation" (SportsCenter, 2011, March 7). On March 11, the day the

University of Southern California played the University of Arizona, Southern California was mentioned again, and it also was mentioned on Lunardi's "first four out" list. The next day, after a 67-62 loss to the University of Arizona, Lunardi had the University of Southern California marked as "in," with an RPI of 65. The commentator remarked: "USC is in despite losing to Arizona in the Pac-10 semis"(SportsCenter, 2011, March 13). Later in the show, Lunardi justified his switch by saying:

"Schedule strength and quality wins are why Southern Cal is right here, plus the fact they suffered some of their early season losses without starting point guard Jio Fontan – so I think the Trojans are in the tournament" (SportsCenter, 2011, March 13).

Both Clemson and the University of Southern California received plenty of coverage and were framed as deserving of the NCAA Tournament. Even after losses, the teams were portrayed as bubble contenders. Viewers of SportsCenter knew they were in the discussion and were the type of teams that were deserving of one of the final four selections into the NCAA Tournament. Virginia Commonwealth and the University of Alabama Birmingham were ignored. After the two schools from outside of the top six conferences were selected, analysts from SportsCenter argued that neither school was in the discussion and that both schools were unworthy of selection into the NCAA Tournament, while schools such as the University of Colorado and Virginia Tech University were mistreated by the selection committee. Their reaction reinforced the dominant frame. Even though both the University of Colorado and Virginia Tech University were not selected as at-large teams, they were portrayed as more deserving of bids than the two schools from conferences outside of the top six conferences.

Teams not included in the 2010-2011 tournament were Harvard University, which had a record of 21-6 and an RPI of 35 (the lowest RPI of any university not to make the tournament

that year); Cleveland State, with a 24-8 record and an RPI of 42; Missouri State University, with a record of 25-8 and an RPI of 43; and St. Mary's University, with a record of 23-8 and an RPI of 46 (RPI, 2011). Two schools from the top six conferences that were endorsed by SportsCenter that didn't make it were Virginia Tech University, with a record of 21-11 and an RPI of 62, and the University of Colorado, with a record of 20-13 and an RPI of 65 (RPI, 2011).

During the 2009-2010 season, the final four teams selected to play in the NCAA Tournament by seed were the University of Texas-El Paso, a 12 seed; Utah State University, a 12 seed; the University of Minnesota, an 11 seed; and the University of Missouri, a 10 seed. The University of Texas-El Paso and Utah State University were expected to win their tournaments, but both lost. Both spent time in the top 25 rankings. Utah State's RPI was 30, while the University of Texas-El Paso's RPI was 38. Missouri's RPI was 44, while Minnesota had an RPI of 62, the highest RPI of any at-large team to qualify for the tournament (RPI, 2010).

SportsCenter pundits bemoaned the losses by the University of Texas-El Paso and Utah State University, since both teams were ranked in the top 30 in the nation, and it was assumed they would get at-large berths. Analyst Hubert Davis tried to make a case against Utah State University the day after the team lost to New Mexico State University in the championship game of the Western Athletic Conference.

“(Utah State) is a very good basketball team, but they lost the WAC final to New Mexico State last night. They beat BYU and Wichita State – but with Minnesota and Mississippi State looking for bids, the champions out of the WAC are a little bit nervous right now” (SportsCenter, 2010, March 14).

Davis stuck with the dominant frame – that teams such as Minnesota and Mississippi State University were deserving of bids, and that they didn't want to have one taken away by

Utah State, a champion of the Western Athletic Conference. Utah State was branded as a bid thief.

The term bid thief deserves special attention. The term is used to describe a team that has amassed a stellar record over the course of the year and is deserving of an NCAA Tournament at-large bid. This team is expected to win its conference tournament and automatically earn that bid. When the team loses, pundits report that this team has now fallen into the at-large pool and knocked out another team; therefore, it becomes a bid thief. Bid thieves almost always come from conferences outside of the six conferences.

On March 8, 2011, ESPN's Lunardi, who studies the potential tournament brackets, said that the Horizon League championship game between Butler University and the University of Milwaukee would be a game with tournament bubble implications:

“You know, Butler is a team that, if you go by the brand, you are obviously going to select them should they need an at-large bid. They've had a very uneven season this year. What happens if they lose to Milwaukee for the third time, this one at Milwaukee for a championship? If Butler gets an at-large bid and Milwaukee gets the automatic, then there is going to be a bid stolen and somebody is going to be left out on Selection Sunday” (SportsCenter, 2011, March 8).

Butler, a team that played in the NCAA Tournament championship game the year before, was called a potential bid thief if it lost its tournament championship game. Not only that, but the team was mentioned as an NCAA Tournament possibility only because of its brand. This maintained the frame against schools from the 25 conferences. This segment called Butler University as inherently inferior. ESPN analysts framed Butler as a mid-major, and therefore inferior to more deserving teams from the six conferences.

The same frame was used in the 2010 season with St. Mary's University. The team won the West Coast Conference final over Gonzaga to earn an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament. Despite the win, pundits framed them as a questionable team.

“It didn't change the bracket map, because we already had St. Mary's in the field. But if St. Mary's had lost, someone could have slipped in. I think I would have kept St. Mary's in, but if you look at the last four in, you have a group that was clearly rooting for Gonzaga. We're not going to put the Gaels in the category of 'bid thief,' but we do know that at least it would have raised a question for some of these teams, and now it doesn't” (SportsCenter, 2010, March 13).

POLITICAL ECONOMY

EXAMING ESPN's HIEARCHY OF INFLUENCE

Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchy of influence is important when examining ESPN, and how the analysts on SportsCenter frame the six conferences compared to the other 25. ESPN hires a specific type of analyst to conform to the hierarchy of influence. As a Disney subsidiary, the corporation might want analysts who were known and knowledgeable about universities with large fan followings, including large alumni bases. The corporation might want to hire people who were knowledgeable about the history, traditions, and nuances of the six major conferences, since these conferences were the ones that are most often covered – and since top teams from these conferences draw the largest ratings. The program structure for these reporters would be set up to highlight their knowledge of specific teams and conferences. This is how ESPN hires its analysts.

ESPN, owned by Disney, hires analysts who have knowledge mainly of the six conferences. During the 2010-2011 college basketball season, ESPN listed a dozen analysts whose specialty was college basketball. Of those, only two – Tom Brennan and Andy Katz – have extensive backgrounds outside of the six major conferences. The others all were players or

coaches for a large part of their careers in the six conferences.¹⁰ It's understandable that these sports personalities concentrate on the six major conferences; that's what they know. They have a predilection toward the strength of these teams. These analysts routinely cover the universities in the six conferences, know them, and build a relationship with them.

An example comes from the February 25, 2011, showing of "College GameDay" on ESPN. During this show, analysts were asked to pick the winners of specific games. One game was the Wichita State- Missouri State matchup in the Missouri Valley Conference. Former University of Indiana and Texas Tech University coach Bob Knight, when asked to predict the winner, coughed and said admitted that he had little to no knowledge of those teams ("College GameDay," 2011a).

NCAA REVEUE DISTRIBUTION

The NCAA basketball fund accounts for 40 percent of the total revenues the NCAA distributes to its Division I members on a yearly basis. The basketball fund is based on conferences' performance in the NCAA on a six-year rolling basis (*2009-2010 Revenue Distribution Plan*, 2009-2010). Units are shares of the total amount allotted from the NCAA Tournament rights deal with CBS. One unit is awarded to each conference for each game a team in that conference plays, except for the championship game. If an independent qualifies, one unit is awarded directly to that university for each game that team plays, except for the championship game (*2009-2010 Revenue Distribution Plan*, 2009-2010).

¹⁰ They include: Bob Knight, Digger Phelps, Jay Williams, Jay Bilas, Hubert Davis, Doug Gottlieb, Mark Gottfried, and Stephen Bardo.

In 1984, a Supreme Court ruling, *NCAA v. the University of Oklahoma Regents*, ended the NCAA's monopoly on negotiating television rights deals for football, giving each school and conference the opportunity to create their own deals (Dunnivant, 2004). The result was that conferences started "branding" their teams – and they combined their brands into what eventually became the BCS (Clotfelter, 2011). The major powers in football didn't have to worry about all the other schools; they were able to secure television deals that benefited their particular conferences (Dunnivant, 2004). This put the majority of football bowl money into the hands of the six BCS conferences (Dunnivant, 2004). That bowl money became a huge deal. To keep the money centralized, the networks started to promote the schools from the major conferences. These conferences contained, and still contain, the vast majority of national contenders (Clotfelter, 2011). Other non-contender schools in those leagues benefited from their success.

Television rights contracts grew exponentially, from \$9.9 million for rights to the NCAA tournament in 1981 to the current deal of \$10.8 billion for television rights. Even though ESPN didn't get the rights to carry the NCAA men's basketball tournament, the network carries more than 1,200 games per year on its broadcast and Internet stations ("ESPN MediaZone | Archive for Press Releases"). The company also profits from its coverage of games on its "SportsCenter" broadcast. As ESPN garnered more and more television rights contracts for large sums of money to six specific conferences, it became an obvious conflict of interest for those who report on the games as journalists (Chittum, 2011).

The exposure leads to a perception that all teams from the six major conferences are superior, while the money leads to resources that allow teams from those conferences to major recruiting advantages (Wenner, 1989b). This led to a more pronounced gap between the

conferences that had large television resources, and those that did not. The differences are pronounced.

In 2010, the University of Texas reported more than \$143 million in athletic revenues and nearly \$114 million in athletic expenses, and it listed basketball expenses of \$8.8 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The University of Kansas, the team that Northern Iowa knocked off in 2010, reported receiving total athletic revenues of \$71.8 million, paid athletic expenses of \$60.2 million, and basketball expenses of \$10.9 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

In 2010 in the Big Ten, Michigan State University received more than \$80 million in revenues, while it spent \$61.6 million in total athletic expenses and \$8.3 million in basketball expenses. Ohio State University earned \$123.1 million in total revenues, spent \$104.9 in total athletic expenses, and spent \$4.5 million in basketball expenses (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Using numbers from the same source, the profits from Michigan State (subtracting revenues from expenses) would equal \$18.4 million. Wichita State University lists its total athletic expenses as \$16.7 million.

To be more precise, Northern Iowa reported athletic revenues of \$14.6 million in 2010, with \$14.3 million in expenses (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Northern Iowa spent just under \$2 million on men's basketball. Creighton, a school without football but with a strong basketball program, reported athletic revenues of \$14.2 million in 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The school broke even that year, reporting its total athletic expenses as \$14.2 million and its basketball expenses as a little more than \$5 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

It's not just the Missouri Valley Conference. Butler, a back-to-back NCAA men's basketball national championship game contender, also broke even, reporting total athletic revenues in 2010 of \$12.3 million, total athletic expenses of \$12.3 million, and \$2.8 million in basketball expenses. Butler, after making it to the championship game in the NCAA Tournament for two straight years, opted to leave the Horizon Conference in 2012 and move to the Atlantic Ten Conference, partly because the Atlantic Ten Conference gets more television revenue from the NCAA Tournament (Jessop, 2012).

In total, NCAA men's basketball conferences received \$10.8 billion over 14 years for the rights to televise the NCAA men's basketball tournament from CBS and Time Warner's Turner Sports (NCAA, 2011). Thirty-one conferences received disbursements totaling \$154,721,003 for the 2008-2009 NCAA rights fees disbursement. Each unit was worth \$206,020. The top six conferences received \$94,357,147, or 61 percent of that disbursement, an average of \$15,726,191 per conference. The other 25 conferences split \$60,363,856, an average of \$2,414,554 per conference. The payouts to the top conferences for the 2008-2009 season is as follows:

- Big East Conference: \$19,365,877.
- Big 12 Conference: \$16,275,578.
- Atlantic Coast Conference: \$15,863,538.
- Southeastern Conference: \$15,657,518.
- Big Ten Conference: \$13,803,338
- Pac Ten Conference: \$13,391,298.

The 2009-2010 season produced total revenues of \$168,434,032. The top six conferences received \$103,548,057 of this disbursement, or 61 percent of the total revenue.

The payouts to the top six conferences are as follows:

- Big East Conference: \$23,109,436.
- Atlantic Coast Conference: \$18,220,902.
- Big Ten Conference: \$17,109,871.
- Big 12 Conference: \$15,332,222.
- Southeastern Conference: \$15,110,016.

- Pac 10 Conference: \$15,110,016.

The money for the top six conferences keeps increasing, and 61 percent is a lot of money as the size of the television deal increases. This is normal for these six conferences. In the five years before 2008-2009, the top six conferences received between 61 percent and 62 percent of the total basketball fund disbursement. The following is a list of the last seven years and the total disbursement for the top six conferences (*2009-2010 Revenue Distribution Plan, 2009-2010*):

The only difference was in the disbursement monies per conference, which changed from year to year. The Big East Conference received the largest payouts over the five-year span, and its teams receive positive coverage on ESPN. The Pac-12 Conference received the lowest payouts of the top six conferences during the five-year span. The difference between the top six conferences compared to the other 25 conferences was extreme.

In 2008-2009, six conferences (Southwestern Athletic Conference, the Summit Conference, the Mid-American Conference, MEAC, the Ivy League and the Atlantic Sun Conference) received the absolute minimum of \$1,236,120. In 2009-2010, they received \$1,333,237. In all, 16 conferences received less than \$2 million for the 2009-2010 season. The top six conferences receive monies from sources other than the NCAA Tournament basketball fund. The conferences are free to make their own deals, usually by combining football and basketball. The Big Ten has television deals with ESPN/ABC, both owned by Disney Corp., and has its own network, CBS and the Big Ten Network, which is partially owned by NewsCorp. The Big Ten makes a little more than \$250 million per year in television money. The

Table 4 (NCAA Television Distribution in percent to the six major conferences)

Year	NCAA television revenues	Amount allotted to six conferences	Percentage of revenues allotted
2004-2005	\$113,724,003	\$70,545,369	62 percent
2005-2006	\$122,822,003	\$76,579,272	62 percent
2006-2007	\$132,648,000	\$81,357,444	61 percent
2007-2008	\$143,259,997	\$88,248,166	62 percent
2008-2009	\$154,721,003	\$94,357,147	61 percent
2009-2010	\$180,467,000	\$113,840,406	63 percent
2010-2011	\$184,075,009	\$114,320,264	62 percent

Southeastern Conference signed a new deal with CBS and ESPN in 2008 and currently makes about \$205 million per year in television revenues (M. Smith & Ourand, 2008). The Big 12 and Pac 12 conferences currently are making about \$78.4 and \$57.5 million per year, respectively, in television rights fees. The ACC also is hoping to sign a new deal after its \$67 million per year in rights fees contracts expire (McCarthy & Wieberg, 2009).

The money leads to greater media exposure. The Big East is guaranteed to have 60 games per year broadcast on ESPN or ESPN2, 110 college basketball games broadcast on all of ESPN's other broadcast platforms (including ESPNU and ESPN360), and a minimum of 10 games per year on CBS ("Big East Television Partners," 2010). The Big Ten deal is guaranteed 60 games to be broadcast on ESPN networks, plus another 26 on CBS and at least 105 regular-season Big Ten games on the Big Ten Network ("Big Ten Media Agreements," 2006). The Big 12 Conference is

guaranteed 60 games on ESPN or ESPN2, with 95 games guaranteed on all ESPN platforms ("Big 12 Sports.com," 2010). The SEC is guaranteed 60 games on ESPN and has games guaranteed to be played on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday (M. Smith & Ourand, 2008).

Other conferences have deals with ESPN, but none has the number of games – and none receives the amount of money – that each of the top six conferences do. Most play on ESPN's secondary networks: ESPN2, ESPNU and others. An example is the Missouri Valley Conference. The Missouri Valley Conference earned \$4.3 million from the NCAA basketball fund in 2009. In 2011, the conference signed new television deals with ESPN and Fox Sports. The ESPN deal is about \$190,000 per year. The schools in the Missouri Valley Conference received about \$290,000 (total) from the 2011 NCAA Tournament.

Butler University has played in the NCAA championship game each of the past two years. The 10 shares Butler earned for the Horizon Conference in two years won't equal what the Big East Conference earned in any one of the last six years. With that in mind, Butler opted to move to the Atlantic Ten Conference – a conference outside of the top six, but one that receives more media attention and more revenue from the NCAA Tournament. The Atlantic Ten received payouts of \$5,991,600 in 2011 from the NCAA, just a little more than the \$4,553,616 the Horizon League received (NCAA, 2011).

The 2010 projected distribution sheet produced by the NCAA shows the disparity in payouts. The Big Ten received \$18.4 million in payouts for the 2010 season, while the Missouri Valley received a little more than \$5 million. The Horizon League, home of Butler, received \$4,553,616.

The disparity isn't just in dollars. There's a difference in exposure, too. One element that made the commissioner of the Missouri Valley Conference, Doug Elgin, happy with the latest

ESPN television contract was that ESPN gave up its rights of exclusivity. Other broadcast networks would be able to negotiate a deal with the Missouri Valley Conference to broadcast the games nationally.

“ESPN relented on the current contract that we just signed for this year – and they not only allow us to take games on Fox Regional and Fox National, but they also simulcast those games online,” Elgin said in an in-depth interview. “They have the rights online, outside of our six-state footprint, and that’s an additional 91 million homes” (Doug Elgin, December 2, 2011). That allows Fox to carry more Missouri Valley Conference games on its regional and national channels. The Valley’s deal with Fox ties into its deal with Learfield Sports (which is confidential). The Missouri Valley Conference pays for the right to broadcast its games on the Fox Network, but the conference gets to keep a large percentage of the advertising sold for those games.

“We make a small profit from our media-rights fees, but it’s a profit,” Elgin said. What’s important, Elgin added, is the exposure provided by getting teams from outside of the six conferences to a national audience. In years past, the Missouri Valley Conference reached about 9.5 million homes with its regional package. The thought of possibly getting into 91 million homes, along with an increased amount of coverage on ESPN networks, helps the conference gain exposure.

Conferences want to be covered by ESPN. The exposure reaches larger numbers of people, and the prestige of being covered by ESPN is important to conferences because it helps sell the conference to future recruits and alumni. Elgin called ESPN exposure the lifeblood of recruiting. ESPN coverage is that important for all conferences. The exposure is so important that conferences outside of the six main conferences will give up money in exchange for exposure.

This is in stark contrast to the six major conferences, who get the majority of exposure and are paid for that exposure (Elgin, December 2, 2011).

The Mountain West Conference, which placed four teams in the 2009-2010 tournament and earned \$4.1 million from the NCAA basketball fund in 2008-2009, has a deal with DirectTV, and CBS College Sports Network that guarantees coverage of games – but only for states and cities that service Mountain West Conference institutions. The Mountain West has no deal with ESPN. The Atlantic Ten Conference, based partially in major media markets on the East Coast, earned \$5.5 million from the 2008-2009 NCAA Basketball Fund and has a 35-game agreement with ESPN broadcast platforms, plus a cable/satellite deal with CBS College Sports Network that mirrors the Mountain West deal ("A-10 announces basketball national schedules," 2006). The deal runs through 2013. The 2012 announcement that both the University of Butler and Virginia Commonwealth University will be joining the Atlantic Ten Conference helps the Atlantic Ten significantly (Jessop, 2012) because of the increased media exposure brought about by two recent Final Four teams. Along with the success of the conference in recent years, this makes the Atlantic Ten a conference that could rise to the top of the conferences outside of the six major conferences in basketball (Jessop, 2012). Despite the improvements, the Atlantic Ten's deal with ESPN will not rival that of the major six conferences (Jessop, 2012).

The disparity in coverage and television rights plays a role in building the perception that teams from smaller conferences are not equal to teams from the six conferences (Wenner, 1989b). This is one factor that leads to fewer teams being selected into the NCAA Tournament as at-large bids. In 2011, the first year of 37 available at-large bids, the six major conferences earned all but seven of them. That left seven at-large bids for the other conferences, or one less than in 2010, when eight were picked. The average since 2001 has been 6.8 bids awarded to

teams outside of the top six conferences. The low was four in 2009, and the high was 12 in 2004. Eleven schools from outside of the top six conferences were selected in 2012.

These numbers remain stagnant despite the success of the mid-majors in the NCAA Tournament. Since 2006, four teams from conferences outside of the top six have advanced to the Final Four (George Mason in 2006, Butler in 2010, Butler in 2011 and Virginia Commonwealth in 2011), with Butler one shot away from winning it all in 2010. In the final section, I explore the relationship between perception and selection into the NCAA Tournament in more depth. First, I provide an examination of how ratings numbers are used to increase exposure to teams from the six major conferences.

RATINGS

The most common reason given for lesser coverage of teams from outside of the top six conferences is ratings. In some instances, this is true, but a deeper examination suggests that this perception may be mediated.

Teams from the other 25 conferences traditionally have lower ratings than teams from the top six conferences. An examination of one week of coverage, February 11-17, 2012, from the website sportsmediawatch.com provides a snapshot that concurs with that reason (Sports Media Watch, 2012). On February 11, a Saturday, Alabama and Louisiana State University, two mid-level teams from the Southeastern Conference (a power conference), played at 7:06 p.m. on ESPN2. The game drew a 0.3 rating, with 479,000 viewers. This beat the three games between schools from the 25 conferences, including a marquee matchup between Missouri Valley Conference leaders Creighton and Wichita State. That game drew a 0.1 rating with 206,000 viewers. Xavier and Temple, a key matchup between two Atlantic Ten teams with a prime time 9:06 p.m. start time, drew a 0.01 rating and just 186,000 fans.

None of these games were comparable to the marquee games from teams from the top six. The University of Kentucky played Vanderbilt at 9 p.m. that night; that contest earned a 1.6 rating and 2,930,000 viewers. Michigan State and Ohio State played on ESPN for a 1.6 rating and drew 2,607,000 viewers, followed by Maryland and Duke with a 1.3 rating and 1,743,000 viewers. The noon start time game that day took place between Louisville and West Virginia, and that matchup drew a 1.0 rating and 1,310,000 viewers (Sports Media Watch, 2012).

Television results for the NCAA Tournament were different. The 2011 tournament was the first tournament that showed every game on different channels. The 2011 tournament had the highest ratings for the NCAA Tournament since 2005 (Sports Media Watch, 2011). The different channels also allow researchers a chance to see what games were on the main channel (CBS) and what games fans decided to watch.

Two teams from outside of the power six conferences, Brigham Young University and Wofford, had the highest ratings through the Thursday-Friday games. More than 4.6 million people watched the two teams play. On Saturday, more people tuned in to watch the Atlantic Ten's Richmond play the Ohio Valley Conference's Morehead State than those who tuned in to watch the University of Kentucky play the University of West Virginia. Through Saturday, three of the five highest-rated games involved teams from conferences outside of the top six.

Similar to the CBS figures, the highest-rated games were played on Sunday. The highest-rated game on cable was the Sunday matchup between Brigham Young and Florida. The game drew a 3.3 rating, with 5,261,000 viewers. Brigham Young is not a team in the top six

Table 5, 2011 NCAA Tournament ratings and channels, continued on p. 92

Date and Game	Network	Ratings	Viewers
3/17			
West Virginia-Clemson	CBS	2.1	2,792,000
Kentucky-Princeton	CBS	2.3	3,304,000
Brigham Young-Wofford	CBS	3.0	4,670,000
Gonzaga-St. John's	CBS	2.6	4,046,000
3/18			
Texas-Oakland	<i>CBS</i>	1.7	2,284,000
Arizona-Memphis	<i>CBS</i>	2.0	2,794,000
North Carolina-LIU	<i>CBS</i>	2.7	4,054,000
Wisconsin-Georgia	<i>CBS</i>	2.8	4,451,000
3/19			
		3.9	5,858,000
Kentucky-West Va.	<i>CBS</i>	4.9	7,427,000
Florida-UCLA	<i>CBS</i>	3.9	6,016,000
Richmond-Morehead St.	<i>CBS</i>	3.0	4,771,000
BYU-Gonzaga	<i>CBS</i>		

 3/20

Table 5, Continued

North Carolina-Washington	CBS	4.2	6,357,000
Duke-Michigan	CBS	6.3	9,666,000
Ohio State-George Mason	CBS	5.6	8,818,000
Connecticut-SDSU	CBS	4.1	6,296,000

Source: SportsMediaWatch.com/http://www.sportsmediawatch.com/2011/05/2011-mens-ncaa-tournament-numbers-game/, continued from p. 91.

conferences. The Butler-Pittsburgh contest was the fourth highest-rated game on cable through the first weekend, trailing only Arizona-Texas (2.6, 4,408) and Kansas-Illinois (2.6, 4,408). Nothing in the numbers suggests that teams from conferences outside of the top six draw smaller audiences. In fact, the numbers show similar ratings for teams from both the top six and the other 25 conferences. Viewers may be interested in seeing teams they have not seen throughout the course of the year.

This offers a different picture than the one offered after George Mason University qualified for the Final Four in 2006. In 2006, George Mason advanced to the Final Four, but just

Table 6, NCAA Ratings and Channel: March 17 and March 19

Date and Game	Network	Ratings	Viewers
3/17			
Morehead St.-Louisville	TBS	0.8	1,116,000
Butler-Old Dominion	TRU	0.4	609,000
Temple-Penn State	TNT	0.6	793,000
Pitt-UNCA	TRU	0.3	510,000
Richmond-Vanderbilt	TBS	1.0	1,505,000
San Diego St.-NOCO	<i>TNT</i>	0.8	1,102,000
Florida-UCSB	<i>TBS</i>	1.0	1,404,000
Connecticut-Bucknell	TNT	0.9	1,349,000
Wisconsin-Belmont	TRU	0.9	1,505,000
UCLA-Mich. State	TBS	1.6	2,437,000
Cincinnati-Missouri	TNT	1.0	1,609,000
Kansas State-Utah St.	TRU	0.6	1,009,000
3/19			
San Diego St.-Temple	TBS	1.9	3,055,000
Butler-Pittsburgh	TNT	2.2	3,555,000
Wisconsin-Kansas St.	TBS	2.0	3,428,000

Source: SportsMediaWatch.com/<http://www.sportsmediawatch.com/2011/05/2011-mens-ncaa-tournament-numbers-game/>

14 percent of the nation saw the Sweet 16 matchup between George Mason and Wichita State (Hiestand, 2006). After advancing to the Final Four, George Mason's loss to Florida drew 14.5 million fans, down from the 2005 season. The championship game drew just a 17.5 rating, down six points from the 2005 championship game between the University of Illinois and North Carolina (Gorman, 2011b). Critics used this to say that fans didn't want to see Cinderellas in the championship game. The reality was that the George Mason Final Four game in the early Final Four time slot, while down from the year before, was a solid rating – one that was not matched until Butler played in the Final Four in both 2010 and 2011. The Butler-Duke national title game drew the same rating as the 2005 Illinois-North Carolina game (Gorman, 2011a). The next year's championship game did not have the same ratings, but its ratings were still solid. Still, after 2012's title game's ratings eclipsed the 2011 ratings, USA Today had the following headline: "With No Cinderella in the NCAA Title game, ratings down 5 percent" (Hiestand, 2012). The headline reinforced the perception that teams from the six conferences draw better ratings, but the story also said that, although ratings were up 5 percent from the 2011 championship game, they were down 3 percent from the 2010 game (Hiestand, 2012).

FRAMING BUTLER

Eighty-five stories were coded from March 30, 2010, until April 6, 2010. Of those stories, 68 percent, or 58 of the 85, used the keywords "Hoosiers," "Cinderella," "underdog," "mid-major," "small," or "David and Goliath." The leader was "Hoosiers," used in the sense of comparing Butler to the movie of the same name. This reference was used in 37 stories, or 43 percent of all the stories.

At the same time, the fact that Butler entered the tournament ranked was used 14 times, or 16.3 percent of the time, and the real reason for the disparity between teams such as Duke and Butler – the school’s athletic budgets – was mentioned just eight times. The dominant frame when discussing Butler in the Final Four and the national championship game was that of Butler as the “other.”

Table 7: 85 total coded stories, March 29-April 10, 2010

Code Words	<i>Mentions</i>	Percentages
Hoosiers	37	43.0
Cinderella	22	25.6
Underdog	26	30.2
Mid-Major	32	37.2
David/Goliath	13	15.1
Small School	22	25.6
NBA players	18	20.9
Butler ranked	14	16.3
Budgets	8	9.3

Source: LexisNexis and ProQuest

When Butler defeated Kansas State University in the Elite Eight to earn its way to the Final Four, Butler had defeated the No. 1 and No. 2 seeds in its bracket. The Bulldogs entered the tournament ranked No. 11 in the nation (AP/ESPN/Coaches, 2010). When the team reached the Final Four, it was on a 24-game winning streak. This was noticed in Las Vegas, where the Bulldogs were picked as the favorite to defeat Michigan State in the Final Four (Youmans, 2010), in a story that noted that Butler was the favorite to win the game:

“Michigan State is a 1½-point underdog to Butler, and take a minute to soak in that line. The public team from the power conference is the ’dog. The small-school Cinderella is the favorite” (Youmans, 2010).

Even when announcing Butler as the favorite to win the game, the writer mentioned Butler as a “small-school Cinderella.” The dominant narrative was maintained while still allowing the writer to report that Butler was a favorite, and that oddsmakers believed Butler should be the favorite:

“Many in the media are portraying Gordon Hayward as Jimmy Chitwood and the Bulldogs as the long-shot team from the movie ‘Hoosiers,’ but oddsmakers don't write Hollywood scripts.

Ken White, an oddsmaker for Las Vegas Sports Consultants, said the right team is favored by the right number.

‘I think Butler is going to win,’ White said. ‘This is not a George Mason, which was such a huge shock to be there’ ” (Youmans, 2010).

Again, the news that Butler was favored and that oddsmakers were standing behind the line was couched in terms that portrayed Butler more as a sentimental favorite or a Hollywood make-believe scenario. The reality was that the mediated script was coming from news reports building a narrative about the game.

Many stories used this frame in the days before the Butler-Michigan State Final Four contest. Las Vegas’ Ed Graney wrote:

“Butler is no fairy tale.

It can win it all. It’s not some feel-good George Mason moment, not after being ranked 11th in the preseason and winning its last 24 games, not after making the NCAA Tournament nine of the last 15 years. Butler is really good. Has been for some time. It can be the team cutting down nets Monday, and nobody should wonder when the movie will be shot if it does” (Graney, 2010a).

Graney wrote about Butler’s record, the fact that it had been ranked all year, and the fact that it was a solid basketball team. But at the end, Graney finished with:

“Down the road, Butler can win this. It’s good enough.

It's not Cinderella.

And yet in many ways, it is" (Graney, 2010a).

Graney couldn't deviate from the dominant narrative. It becomes difficult for a writer to pull away from this type of narrative. By examining Shoemaker and Reese, and the hierarchy of influence, it's clear that news routine plays a role in controlling the narrative. Writers work in an environment that pays close attention to what other media are reporting. The frame with Butler was prominent. It played to the average fan's lack of knowledge about Butler, and it came from a basis in perceived fact. Butler had not been in the conversation as a potential Final Four team in the weeks leading up to the NCAA Tournament. As documented earlier, ESPN's SportsCenter paid little attention to Butler in the weeks leading up to the NCAA Tournament. The week the tournament field was announced, Butler was ranked 11th in the Associated Press poll (AP/ESPN/Coaches, 2010). That same week, Butler was ranked eighth in the ESPN/USA Today Coaches Poll (AP/ESPN/Coaches, 2010). The two teams above Butler in the AP poll were Purdue and Villanova (AP/ESPN/Coaches, 2010). Purdue lost a key player in the weeks before the tournament started, and analysts stopped talking about them as a possible Final Four contender. Villanova was a No. 2 seed in the tournament and was considered a viable Final Four candidate from its seed alone. In the ESPN/USA Today Coaches Poll, Butler was ranked above Villanova (AP/ESPN/Coaches, 2010). Because Butler was not a team from the six major conferences, media overlooked the talent on the team. Of the 85 coded stories from the week before and through the NCAA championship game, just 14 mentioned that Butler was ranked. One writer, the Boston Globe's respected columnist Bob Ryan, wrote:

"Butler might emerge as the national champion. But regardless of Butler's willingness to embrace the David vs. Goliath analogy, people who follow college

basketball know it won't be anything of the sort. It will mean the team ranked No. 3 in the final regular-season polls will have been beaten by the squad ranked No. 8 by the Associated Press writers and broadcasters and No. 11 by the coaches who make up the ESPN/USA Today voting body. It will mean the preseason No. 9 team by the Blue Ribbon Yearbook – basketball's pre-eminent publication – will have defeated the preseason No. 11. So what's the big deal? It's a big deal because the casual fan is used to Duke and, outside of Indianapolis, is not used to Butler" (B. Ryan, 2010).

Ryan placed blame on Butler for accepting Cinderella's slipper, and he blamed the fans for not knowing who Butler was. He gave Butler credit for being a good team – a ranked team that had the talent to be in the title game. He stopped short of writing that media had not done their job of informing fans of who Butler was. Even when arguing against the dominant narrative, Ryan excused the narrative.

Most reporters didn't write against the narrative in any way. Of the stories coded, a common theme in the days before the Final Four matchup with Michigan State was to concentrate on Butler the small school, the fact that Butler was playing at home, and that Butler players still had to go to class. When writing about the game, the narrative never wavered. Butler was the underdog:

"Many of those shirts are being sold to people whose allegiance had been with other schools. Butler has an enrollment of 3,899. The school has about 17,000 alumni living in Indianapolis or the surrounding counties – enough to fill less than a quarter of Lucas Oil Stadium. By comparison, there are 52,000 Purdue alumni in the region and 102,000 Indiana alumni.

All have something in common, though, that has rallied this state around Butler: an almost religious belief in the underdog" (French, 2010).

The story mentioned differences between Butler and the two Big Ten Conference schools, starting with enrollment and alumni. Both universities receive more exposure on ESPN and in Indianapolis media. Both have larger alumni bases and fan bases. But the reporter never makes

the connection between the differences in enrollment and television exposure. The reporter never wrote about the imbalance in media coverage that led to the underdog frame. Instead, the reporter followed the dominant narrative and wrote that those fans are now Butler fans because of their love for the underdog.

On March 31, the Chicago Tribune's David Haugh wrote a column comparing Butler to the movie "Hoosiers." In the column, Haugh wrote:

"In 'Hoosiers,' Hickory player Merle Webb urges his teammates to 'win this game for all the small schools that never had a chance to get here.' In that way, when Butler takes the floor Saturday, the Bulldogs will take all the Valparaisos and Northern Iowas and Bradleys who never got a chance to get there with them" (Haugh, 2010).

Haugh romanticized the differences between schools in the top six conferences and those from the other 25. There's nothing unfair about this; fans who rooted for schools from the other 25 conferences did root for Butler. Those fans did adopt Butler as their team for that reason. The problem with the frame is that it mediated Butler. The story did not examine Butler for its qualities; it examined Butler for its ability to sell a specific image. That image required Butler to be seen as a plucky underdog, not a team that entered the Final Four as a favorite to advance to the championship game.

The Chicago Tribune's Shannon Ryan wrote, in a story titled "Storybook ending for Butler?": "But this weekend, the story is whether Butler can pull off an upset and make us forget about our busted brackets. And maybe inspire 'Hoosiers II' " (S. Ryan, 2010).

Again, the frame qualified Butler as an underdog – and a commodity. The sellable issue was its ability to be viewed as an underdog and reach the fans who wanted to root for the little guy.

Bryan Burwell, columnist for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, wrote:

“If you did not realize it before now, let’s make things perfectly clear. Until further notice, this is Butler’s Final Four. It is as unavoidable as all the sappy, but totally understandable, ‘Hoosiers’ celluloid comparisons. This is their town, their tournament, their wonderfully charming, incredibly improbable Cinderella story.

“It might all come crashing to a resounding thud tonight inside Lucas Oil Stadium in the national semifinals against Michigan State, and if it does, this basketball-obsessed state will go into a somber state of mourning. But until the Bulldogs have been counted out – and oh my, wouldn’t it be something if they were the last team standing on Monday night? – the rest of us will just have to play along” (Burwell, 2010a).

Burwell followed the dominant narrative. Butler was the story and the story framed Butler as the underdog. He mentioned that Butler might win, but he wrote about it as if a win would be a pleasant surprise, not as a possibility for a team that was favored. He wrote about the fact that Butler was good in the copy of the story and then returned to the predominant frame at the end: “Then again, what really is normal anymore? Butler’s in the Final Four, and they just might win” (Burwell, 2010a).

The dominant frame was not always prominent. The Chicago Tribune’s Chris DuFresne wrote:

“Despite all the ‘Hoosiers’ comparisons, Butler really is not an underdog story. Yes, Butler plays in famed Hinkle Fieldhouse, the place where upstart Milan won the 1954 Indiana state title. Yet it’s hard to get too sentimental over a Butler team oddsmakers favor to beat Michigan State. The Bulldogs started the year ranked in the top 10, have been to nine NCAA tournaments in the last 14 years and have a future NBA player in Gordon Hayward” (DuFresne, 2010).

Comments such as DuFresne’s were rare. Most reporters did not follow this narrative throughout the story. The underdog frame remained after Butler’s victory over Michigan State. The Boston Globe’s Mark Blaudschun wrote:

“The story has one more chapter. The little, mid-major school that began its season with big hopes and a growing reputation traveled six miles to Lucas Oil Stadium last night and took on Michigan State in a Final Four semifinal game. And when the final buzzer sounded, the Butler Bulldogs – the Horizon League Butler Bulldogs – won their 25th consecutive game and earned a spot in their first national championship game with a 52-50 victory” (Blaudschun, 2010).

Blaudschun separated Butler from other teams by denoting the conference, and the fact that Butler is not from the top six conferences. The victory was portrayed as improbable. A reader can easily discern a sense of disbelief after reading Blaudshun’s lead. The Las Vegas Review-Journal’s Ed Graney hit on a number of points in his column about Butler’s victory:

“It’s not even the Horizon Conference. It’s the Horizon League. Does every player receive a participation trophy at season’s end? Are you allowed to put a sponsor’s name on the jerseys? Is it possible you might see Uncle Al’s Body Shop slapped across the back of some player from Wright State?”

“The thing about a mid-major label is that it’s all about money and power. Those with the most are considered major players. Those with the least aren’t.

“Butler has changed all that the last three weeks with The Way. It embodies the ideals of humility, passion, unity, servanthood and thankfulness. Coaches and players have changed at Butler the last decade, but the secret to success hasn’t” (Graney, 2010b).

First, Graney wrote that the Horizon League is not a big-time league. He followed with a paragraph about the mid-major label, succinctly stating the differences between schools in the six major conferences and those outside of those conferences. It is about money and power. The six conferences have the money and the power. The other 25 conferences don’t. Butler’s run in the 2010 national tournament wasn’t enough to place it among those with power. Butler’s run in the 2011 national tournament wasn’t enough to make it a major player in terms of money and power. After all, Butler’s run to the championship game in 2010 didn’t even equal the starting shares for the Big East and other conferences from the six major conferences. That’s one reason Butler

announced a move to the Atlantic 10 Conference after the 2012 season. Even though the Atlantic 10 Conference isn't one of the top six conferences, it has placed multiple teams in the tournament for consecutive years and will raise Butler's visibility nationally.

Graney followed that paragraph with a return to the dominant narrative: that Butler won because of a system, not because of the talent of its players. The frame gives a reason for Butler's success, and it can't be about talent; if it was, it could disturb the hegemonic force in the media's narrative.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch stayed within the dominant narrative:

“Come on, tell me how much you saw this coming.

“Butler in college basketball's national championship game?

“No matter how much they kept winning (and it's 25 victories in a row and counting), no matter how often they refused to behave like a darned 'mid-major,' no matter how often they kept reminding us that a school this small really could legitimately live a national championship dream, the basketball world greeted them with careful reservation” (Burwell, 2010b).

So did the Denver Post:

“For nearly 11 minutes Saturday, it appeared improbability and Hollywood would lose out to athleticism and experience. Butler, still wearing a glass slipper into the Final Four, didn't score a basket in that span late in the game” (Henderson, 2010).

Both columnists praised Butler, but they did so with a surprised tone. The Denver Post story said it appeared that Butler would lose out to athleticism and experience, but its writer didn't take into account that Butler had two players on its roster who would play in the NBA. The writer of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch story was just surprised that a small school could do so well. The surprised tone is important, especially when comparing these stories to the reaction to the championship game with Duke. Duke won the championship game by two points, after a last-

second shot by a Butler player rolled in and out of the basket. The win gave reporters a chance to emphasize the status quo. Following are a number of leads from the day after the game:

The Detroit news wrote:

“In the end, it was about Goliath and a basketball program heaped in tradition, although it was David who captivated the Final Four weekend and the national championship game” (Chengelis, 2010).

Detroit News columnist Bob Wojnowski wrote:

“It was the Greatest Story Almost Told, a classic in every sense. Butler had the crowd and the vibe and the oh-so-special tale. But in the end, it wasn't storybook. It was Duke textbook.

The truth is, sometimes the big guy wins. Barely” (Wojnowski, 2010).

AP stories from the Deseret Morning News in Salt Lake City Utah said:

“The too-perfect basketball story with the too-perfect ending is still available on DVD. The real celebration for the new national champion? That's taking place on Tobacco Road. Kyle Singler scored 19 points and Brian Zoubek rebounded Gordon Hayward's miss with 3.6 seconds left Monday night to help Duke beat Butler 61-59, ending the tiny underdog's try for a 'Hoosiers' sequel one win short of the Hollywood ending” (Pells, 2010).

And the AP's Nancy Armour wrote:

“Life is never going to be quite the same for the little guys. Butler may have lost to Duke 61-59 in the national title game Monday night. By hanging with Duke and making the Blue Devils work for every last bit of their fourth national title, though, the Bulldogs reminded everyone that heart, not size or status, is what matters most” (Armour, 2010).

Finally, St. Louis Post-Dispatch's Bryan Burwell wrote:

“The scoreboard glared 'Duke 61, Butler 59,' as if that was all we needed to know. The scoreboard told us that Goliath won, that the Hollywood movie that had become the storyline of this improbable Butler season had at last come to an unhappy end.

“If this had been in the hands of a Hollywood dream maker, the moment that ball left Gordon Hayward's fingertips as he lifted off the ground with his foot stomping

squarely on the half-court stripe, with the clocking ticking down to zero, with the entire building – heck, the whole basketball world – waiting to exhale, there would have been only one possible ending.

“Sweet string music. A thunderous roar. Slumped shoulders in the Duke cheering section. Sheer madness everywhere else.

“But Hollywood couldn’t make this movie, so the ball glanced off the backboard too hard, bounced cruelly off the front iron, and all we got were groans inside this entirely pro-Butler building.

“David lost.

“But you know what? It still was the greatest basketball story ever told” (Burwell, 2010c).

Most stories about a championship game focus on the winner. These stories focused on the loser. Butler was given a specific place in the narrative: that of a wonderful, improbable story that didn’t really belong. The world was right again. Goliath won, as he should have. The writers were able to place Butler’s run in the realm of the improbable. Butler’s “too-perfect run” (Pells, 2010) was stopped. The world was right. Duke was the champion. The stories from the AP ran in newspapers across the country. Even the Nancy Armour story placed Butler back in the dominant narrative. Armour credited Butler for having “heart” (Armour, 2010) without crediting the team for its talent.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

EFFECTS

AGENDA-SETTING

This research took a multifaceted approach to answering the overall research question: Does ESPN, through its major sports journalism vehicle SportsCenter, contribute to an unfair advantage for teams from the six NCAA Division I college basketball major conferences?

To answer this question, other research questions were posed through different fields of study. The first field of study examined the question through an effects model. This was necessary to examine SportsCenter from an agenda-setting and framing perspective. This portion of the overall research centered on SportsCenter's ability to set a national sports agenda in certain situations – one of which is the discussion of teams on the NCAA Tournament bubble.

The overall research question for this portion of the dissertation asked if there is an agenda-setting connection between SportsCenter and the sports press: Does ESPN's SportsCenter have an intermedia agenda-setting effect on regional newspapers across the United States in terms of its national coverage of college basketball? The hypotheses were confirmed for the 2009-2010 season but rejected for the 2010-2011 season.

The results from the 2009-2010 season suggest a significant relationship between what SportsCenter puts on its show one day and what shows up in newspapers the next day. This agenda-setting relationship is what could be expected, given SportsCenter's audience reach and its position as the major provider of national sports news information. The findings suggest that

teams SportsCenter mentioned often were teams newspapers accepted as potential bubble teams. This may have led to fewer regional papers promoting the local team as a bubble possibility.

The strongest relationship came when examining teams from the six major conferences. The beta coefficient of 0.55 suggests a strong significance in the relationship between SportsCenter and the regional newspapers. When it came to the six major conferences, ESPN set the agenda in the 2009-2010 season, and the newspapers followed. This high relationship suggests that the schools ESPN picks as top bubble contenders become the schools on which newspapers and other mass media concentrate their bubble coverage. The relationship between SportsCenter and the regional newspapers in the other 25 conferences suggested that SportsCenter selects them as well. The beta coefficient of .48 suggests that SportsCenter set the agenda about the schools outside of the top six conferences. The relationship suggests that, during the 2009-2010 season, SportsCenter played a role in determining who was in the national conversation, from schools in both the top six conferences and the other 25 conferences, leading up to the selection of the NCAA Tournament.

These findings suggest that SportsCenter played a strong role in determining which teams should be under consideration for selection into the NCAA Tournament. While tracing a direct causation between what SportsCenter said and what the NCAA committee did is impossible, members of the committee were aware of the teams most mentioned by ESPN, and by newspapers, as bubble teams.

The results for the 2011 season were less conclusive. The .26 beta coefficient between SportsCenter and the newspapers suggests some relationship between what SportsCenter said and what the newspapers wrote concerning the six major conferences. But the .42 significance

level suggests that the numbers are statistically not significant. The results from the other 25 conferences also failed to show a relationship and were not significant.

The limited significance level was a matter of concern throughout the study because of the sample size. Taping 21 days of SportsCenter provided a small sample size, and the small sample size affects significance. The small sample size was necessary for the type of study and for the model. The most concentrated talk is in the final two weeks before the NCAA Tournament selection. Even a short time such as three weeks before NCAA Tournament selection provided fewer conversations on SportsCenter about the tournament bubble. Data from SportsCenter obtained longer than a month from tournament selection would provide fewer mentions about the NCAA Tournament bubble, and more opportunities for a team to solidify a place in the tournament, making those discussions less relevant. This could point to a reason why something is not visible in the results.

Other factors played a role in the 2011 results. At least one of those factors revolved around SportsCenter's coverage. In the 2011 season, SportsCenter mentioned specific teams from outside of the top six conferences as possible NCAA Tournament teams just 20 times. This small sample size proved to be too small to provide a reliable model.

The model that worked well for the 2010 season did not work as well in 2011. One explanation may be the amount of coverage ESPN's SportsCenter devoted to college basketball in 2010 and in 2011. The number of stories recorded in 2010 was 157, compared to just 132 in 2011. In 2010, SportsCenter presented an average of 7.5 stories devoted to college basketball per day in the three weeks leading to the NCAA Tournament selection. In 2011, SportsCenter presented an average of just 6.2 stories.

One possible reason for this decrease in coverage could have been the television contract the NCAA signed with CBS and Turner Sports after the 2010 season. That contract – a 14-year, \$11 billion deal – cut ESPN out of the NCAA men’s basketball tournament. ESPN had been interested in the rights but did not bid high enough to win the NCAA bid. Without any connection to the NCAA tournament, ESPN devoted less time to NCAA men’s college basketball.

Also, coverage in February and early March focused on the impending 2011 NFL football strike. ESPN devoted heavy coverage to the strike during this period in 2011. ESPN had a vested interest in the strike, because ESPN carries NFL football games. Strike news also was high in demand during that time period. This may have been a factor in SportsCenter’s diminished 2011 coverage.

Finally, the success of Butler in 2010 could have led some sports reporters to look at teams from a different perspective. Top sports reporters might have spent more time examining teams from outside of the top six conferences without the help of SportsCenter that year. The success of Butler in 2010 could have led to these reporters paying more attention to the success of teams without paying as much attention to what SportsCenter was reporting. This “Butler effect” could have contributed to a smaller agenda-setting effect in 2011 compared to 2010.

A number of possible research avenues become present after this study. A long-term study of how SportsCenter covers teams from the six major conferences and the NCAA Tournament bubble over a period of years would provide an excellent opportunity to understand what factors influence ESPN’s decisions on how much coverage it devotes to college basketball, and how that coverage affects the coverage newspapers devote to the teams ESPN selects. A

long-term study could give more credence to one of the two outcomes derived in 2010 and 2011. Is ESPN's coverage affected by its coverage of sports in which it has a monetary interest? While ESPN certainly has a monetary interest in college basketball, ESPN's connections with the NFL and NBA are higher on its coverage radar because ESPN televises playoff games in both sports. Will stories that develop in these two leagues take precedence over its NCAA coverage as time progresses?

The long-term study also would answer variance issues that appeared in this study, namely the small sample size. The small sample size is necessary for this type of study. But if the study covered a larger number of years, the smaller sample size would be less of a problem. A larger sample of years would provide more information on what type of ongoing influence ESPN's SportsCenter has on newspaper coverage. It also would give researchers a better understanding of how ESPN's SportsCenter's coverage sets the agenda for sports pages across the country.

The agenda-setting study provided useful information for this research. The results of the study suggest that newspapers pay attention to what SportsCenter is reporting. SportsCenter plays a role in determining the national sports agenda in terms of the NCAA men's basketball tournament bubble. SportsCenter is not the sole determinant of which teams are chosen for the tournament, or if the NCAA Tournament committee pays any attention to SportsCenter at all. Other factors lead to selections for the NCAA Tournament. But media attention and exposure are factors, and SportsCenter directly influences those factors with its coverage.

Examining SportsCenter's role in agenda-setting, the media telling the audience what to think about, is only one part of the effects section of this overall the research. The next portion of

this study examines framing – the media’s role in determining how audiences think about an issue. This research examined the role SportsCenter played in framing teams from the six major conferences as compared to teams from the other 25 conferences in terms of salience and bias. In both cases, the differences were significant.

FRAMING

The second section of the effects study concentrated on how ESPN’s SportsCenter framed conversations about the NCAA Tournament bubble. The original research question – “Does ESPN, through its major sports journalism vehicle SportsCenter, contribute to an unfair advantage for teams from the six NCAA Division I college basketball major conferences?”– led to four specific research questions:

R-1: Does ESPN’s college-basketball related shows, SportsCenter and College GameDay, give more salience to specific issues that project average teams from the six major conferences as more deserving of the final NCAA Tournament bids than are teams from the other 25 conferences?

R-2: Does ESPN’s college-basketball-related shows, SportsCenter and College GameDay, frame issue attributes consistently when comparing teams from the six major conferences with teams from the other 25 conferences?

The second section of the study questioned bias in terms of framing. This study asked the following questions:

R-3: Does ESPN’s SportsCenter frame mid-level schools from the six major conferences in a way that makes them seem superior to top teams from the other 25 conferences in discussions about the NCAA Tournament’s bubble?

R-4: Does ESPN's SportsCenter fail to cover teams from the other 25 conferences, or frame them in a negative light in discussions about the NCAA Tournament's bubble?

This research provides solid evidence that SportsCenter frames schools from the six major conferences differently, and with a more positive slant, than it frames schools from the other 25 conferences.

Selection into the NCAA Tournament depends on numerous factors, including RPI, strength of schedule, good wins, and bad losses. The analysts on SportsCenter placed a different importance on these attributes, emphasizing attributes that worked to present the six major conferences differently than the other 25 conferences. The SportsCenter analysts often concentrated on how teams did against teams with an RPI in the top 50, paying more attention to other teams' RPI's than to the team they were talking about in the story's RPI. This becomes important when discussing top teams from the other 25 conferences. Many times those teams have RPIs in the top 50 but don't play as many teams with RPIs in the top 50. By placing the emphasis on the opponent rather than the team being covered, the emphasis on the quality of the team is replaced by an emphasis on the quality of the opponents, or conference, in which these teams play. This shift in emphasis places teams from outside of the top six conferences at a major disadvantage when it comes to being analyzed on SportsCenter. This takes the emphasis away from which team is more deserving, and places the emphasis on which conference is more deserving. The quality of the individual team becomes less important in this frame. It also serves to enhance the viewers' perception that the six major conferences are stronger. Many top teams do play in the six major conferences, and they deserve to be in the NCAA Tournament. Lesser teams from those same conferences receive the same treatment as the top teams.

This creates a separate narrative for teams outside of the top six. SportsCenter creates a separate set of criteria for schools outside of the top six conferences to receive coverage. These criteria exclude teams from the other 25 conferences because of who those teams play. A win over a team from the six major conferences only counts in certain situations. SportsCenter's coverage of the University of Colorado is an example. In the 2011 season, Harvard University defeated the University of Colorado. Harvard finished the season with an RPI of 35, the lowest RPI of any at-large team not included in the NCAA Tournament that year. Colorado's RPI was 65. SportsCenter analysts were upset that Colorado was not selected for the NCAA Tournament, and they believed that Harvard was barely worthy of consideration for selection as an at-large team because Harvard's conference was considered inferior. This example is covered thoroughly later in this chapter.

The effect of this narrative is to take away the emphasis on a tool such as the RPI, one of the few tools the NCAA selection committee has that presents teams from outside of the top six conferences in a positive light. By emphasizing wins against the top 50 as a point of emphasis, SportsCenter shifted attribute salience from RPI to wins against the top 50 in the RPI. Viewers are asked to believe that RPI is much less important than wins against top teams in the RPI. This point is emphasized repeatedly, and analysts will go so far as to denigrate the RPI overall as a flawed tool.

This shift in emphasis makes it difficult for teams from outside of the top six conferences to compete. Talented teams – teams that are ranked in the top 10 in the nation – suffer from this narrative. The success of the individual team is rendered unimportant. Because the number of traditional powers is so high in the top six conferences, average teams from those conferences

have multiple opportunities to pull off an upset that will secure their trip to the NCAA Tournament. Just a few wins at home, combined with constant media exposure, give these teams a boost in perception that teams from outside of the top six conferences cannot hope to achieve. This leads to the conclusion that ESPN's college basketball-related shows, SportsCenter and College GameDay, give more salience to specific issues that project average teams from the six major conferences as more deserving of the final NCAA Tournament bids than teams from the other 25 conferences.

The second research question dealt with consistency of framing issues. The data suggest that SportsCenter frames issues concerning schools from the top six in a more positive light. Even when the analysts are talking about teams that they don't think will qualify for the NCAA Tournament, their language and tone is more positive than is coverage of teams from outside of the top six conferences. A separate narrative is established for teams in the other 25 conferences. When those teams are mentioned, the narrative relates the negative – most often the schedule and the bad losses the team had. Key wins often are mentioned later in the conversation. The conversation centers on the negative.

This leads to discussion of framing and bias. Entman wrote that, to prove bias through framing, one needed to “show patterns of slant that regularly prime audiences, consciously or unconsciously, to support the interests of particular holders or seekers of political power” (Entman, 2007). This research followed Entman's roadmap, and the results suggests that SportsCenter has a pattern of slanting the news when it comes to covering possible teams for the NCAA Tournament. As for R-3, for the two years examined, SportsCenter consistently framed mid-level schools that played in the six major conferences as superior and deserving of NCAA

Tournament consideration. The viability of teams from the six major conferences became the dominant frame when discussing the NCAA Tournament's selection of the final teams that would qualify. Teams from the six major conferences were mentioned more often than teams from the other 25 conferences. Teams from the six major conferences were mentioned in more than 70 percent of the stories that covered college basketball. The sheer numbers and coverage worked to portray teams from the six major conferences as more deserving. Statements that ESPN covered the best teams, and that those teams were in the top six conferences, don't take into account that Butler University was ranked in the top 12 heading into the NCAA Tournament in 2012 and was mentioned just three times on SportsCenter in the three weeks leading up to the NCAA Tournament. Butler went on to play for the NCAA title. SportsCenter did more than just provide exposure to the top six conferences; it framed its stories in ways that established a positive narrative for average teams from top conferences. The University of Colorado men's basketball team was mentioned more than any other team as a bubble team during the 2011 run of SportsCenter broadcasts. Colorado had an RPI in the 60s and lost to Harvard, the team with the lowest RPI of all teams omitted from the 2011 NCAA men's basketball tournament. This fact was never mentioned on SportsCenter. Harvard, despite its lower RPI and the fact that it beat Colorado, was not considered by SportsCenter pundits as a possible at-large team. Harvard's win over Colorado was discarded by the pundits because Colorado's RPI was in the 60s, meaning the win by Harvard did not count as a quality win. Harvard was not mentioned on SportsCenter as a possible at-large team. It was mentioned on College GameDay, but even then it was mentioned in a negative light. Harvard plays in the Ivy League. The Ivy League is not a traditionally strong conference. No team from the Ivy League has ever qualified for the NCAA Tournament as an at-large team. At the same time, no Ivy League team ever earned an RPI of 35 and didn't win the

conference outright. Two schools from the Ivy League were tournament-worthy that year. That was not the narrative SportsCenter presented. Harvard was never presented as at-large worthy, despite its win over Colorado. The University of Colorado's RPI was bad enough that Harvard's win over Colorado was not considered quality by the analysts' standards. Therefore, it wasn't mentioned. The audience didn't get the opportunity to make a decision about the worthiness of Harvard or Colorado; instead, the audience was given a number of arguments that presented Colorado as tournament-worthy. ESPN consistently portrays schools from the top six conferences as more deserving of schools from the other 25 conferences. This frame affects how audiences perceive teams from the other 25 conferences.

Losses, though damaging, were not portrayed in the same light with teams from the six conferences compared to teams from the other 25 conferences. At the same time, teams from the other 25 conferences often were ignored or presented with a more stringent standard to qualify as a final at-large as compared to the teams from the six conferences. During the 2011 season, ESPN analyst Joe Lunardi said that St. Mary's University should be in the tournament. He didn't mention the team again until the morning before the committee picked the NCAA Tournament field. The lack of coverage and the higher standard supports the dominant frame and answers R-4.

Entman defined content bias as news that "favors one side rather than providing equivalent treatment to both sides in a conflict" (Entman, 2007). The treatment of mid-level schools from the six conferences compared to the treatment of top schools from the 25 other conferences is not equal. It is decidedly slanted.

Further research for this section would yield a larger picture of how ESPN frames the NCAA bubble. Unlike the agenda-setting study, the framing research yielded consistent frames from 2010 to 2011, with only the names of the teams changing. The advantage of continuing this study for multiple years would allow for variance in coverage over the years. Would SportsCenter's coverage of teams from the other 25 conferences be more positive with the success of Butler and Virginia Commonwealth University? Or will ESPN continue to highlight its coverage of the six major conferences despite the success of others? These questions provide a further avenue of study.

EFFECTS

The examination of SportsCenter during 2010 and 2011 suggests that:

1. Newspapers are aware of what SportsCenter is reporting when it comes to the NCAA Tournament bubble.
2. ESPN's SportsCenter has a specific point of view that it is trying to convey to its audience.

The agenda-setting model provided evidence that a strong relationship existed between SportsCenter and a group of large and regional newspapers in 2010. Even though the strong relationship was not present in 2011, newspapers were aware of what ESPN was reporting (Joe Lunardi was mentioned by name 26 times during the three weeks leading to the NCAA Tournament by the newspapers studied for the agenda-setting study). Even if newspapers were not as willing to follow what SportsCenter said during 2011, those newspapers knew enough about what was happening on SportsCenter to mention Lunardi by name.

SportsCenter has a point of view. That perspective is geared toward the six power conferences. ESPN devotes the majority of its coverage to those conferences and reports on those conferences favorably, compared to its coverage of the other 25 conferences and in relationship to the NCAA Tournament bubble. The exposure and the nature of the coverage form a slant

toward the six major conferences. Over years, that coverage could lead to an increased perception that mid-level teams from the six power conferences are more deserving of selection than are top teams from the other 25 conferences. On years when SportsCenter's coverage correlates with the coverage of newspapers, that perception could be increased. On other years, SportsCenter's message isn't being refuted. This section of research, the effects section, answered what was happening. The next section, the political economic section, provides evidence as to why this is so.

POLITICAL ECONOMICS

Examining the influence of money and power provides an insight into why ESPN has a vested interest in covering the six major conferences more than the other 25 conferences. ESPN has hundreds of millions of dollars tied up in television rights, with the vast majority of that money going to teams from the six major conferences. The example of the difference between the Big Ten Conference's television contracts (the Big Ten makes about \$250 million per year) and the Missouri Valley Conference (about \$190,000 per year from ESPN) are extreme. This difference goes into athletic budgets and helps to create an economic disparity that between the six major conferences and the other 25 (Texas' \$143 million yearly budget is more than 11 times that of Butler's). The NCAA basketball fund – the money distributed to NCAA schools that qualify for the tournament – contributes to the disparity. More than 60 percent of the NCAA basketball fund ends up in the hands of the six major conferences. It is necessary for the six major conferences to maintain that average for their continued financial success.

It is important for ESPN, owned by Disney, to enhance the success of the schools from the six major conferences. ESPN needs the best games on its network. The network has been able

to carry games from the other 25 conferences for less money. Those conferences are willing to accept fewer dollars in return for the national exposure ESPN's networks provide. The best games from many of those conferences can be carried, most often on ESPN's secondary networks. The top contests between teams from the other conferences are good for ESPN, drawing modest ratings on the secondary networks, but still providing content for the secondary networks. Securing the top games from the top teams in the top six conferences is vital for ESPN. With those games locked up and the conferences locked into expensive rights packages, ESPN must promote the top teams in those conferences to draw top Nielsen ratings. Solid ratings also can be gained from lesser teams in these conferences because of better marketing practices, as well as larger alumni and fan bases. Those ratings often are higher than ratings from top teams in other conferences. That could be an effect of interest from fans. Which ESPN network carries the game may also play a role in ratings. A third reason is possible number of fans. Many fans are alumni or have family who were alumni of those schools. Other schools – those with national programs – draw fans purely because of the team's popularity. Still, the alumni factor is important. Many of those alumni live in major metro areas and represent key demographics in ratings profiles. ESPN uses its major sports journalism show, SportsCenter, to reach many of those people. SportsCenter reaches nearly 100 million fans a month, according to ESPN. If the fans don't see the game, they turn to SportsCenter, the only national sports journalism/clips show on television. SportsCenter provides a version of news that serves to reach those fans.

ESPN hires analysts with connections to the six major conferences. These analysts are known to the average fan and have a certain amount of celebrity gained through their success as players or coaches before they become television analysts. Those analysts have ties to those conferences, know the conferences, and know the teams in those conferences well. Because of

that knowledge, they have certain ingrained predilections for teams from those conferences. These analysts build a narrative that is supportive of teams from the six major conferences. This narrative is not new; in fact, it has been around for years. What has changed with ESPN is this narrative's connection to specific conferences. The connection to these conferences, and the money involved in television rights for these conferences, has led to a mass shift in teams playing for these conferences. Traditional rivalries have been tossed aside for television rights packages and the money available for these conferences. The shift has been radical. Many universities that previously were from one of the other 25 conferences have been invited into the six major conferences.

All of this is done so that ESPN has the rights to the “best” teams year in and year out, because the “best” teams come from the six major conferences. ESPN needs these teams. It doesn't matter which teams are the best, as long as they are within ESPN's coverage zone and in the top six conferences. This is fungibility. For ESPN, the important part is having the top teams from the top conferences. If one of the traditional teams has a bad year, ESPN is able to switch its focus to the team leading the conference and promote that team as one of the top teams of the year. In 2010, North Carolina, a traditional powerhouse, was struggling. ESPN increased its coverage of Duke – and also increased its coverage of the Big East Conference, portraying that conference as the best with the best teams. It didn't matter that North Carolina was bad that year; the emphasis just changed to the Big East.

The important part is not the team that is being marketed. ESPN is able to promote a team from one of the six top conferences as the best. The interests of the conference, and of ESPN, are served when a team from one of those conferences is marked by ESPN as the best. This raises the

visibility of the entire conference. This also raises the visibility of average teams from that conference. The average teams get the opportunity to play the best teams at home. Homecourt advantage, a large fan base and a well-played game by the average team leads to more than a few upsets. Those upsets serve to increase the visibility of the average team and energize its fan base. The fans then look to SportsCenter to see if their team will qualify for the NCAA Tournament. A narrative is built to serve those fans.

Finding the best team is not always important. If a team is promotable as the best, and if that team is within the six conferences, that team becomes the best. This works for a number of reasons. It allows the average fan the luxury of knowing that one of the top teams is within a group of conferences. The fan does not have to search from all 25 conferences and search through all the teams to know where the top teams are. It allows a dominant paradigm. The average fan is able to “know” that he or she is watching the best teams. If only a few teams are the best every year, the fan can build some knowledge through exposure. A hegemonic effect exists. ESPN presents the six conferences as the powered elite. Those conferences receive the exposure and coverage. Those conferences have the winners. The others must work within the system to advance as far as they can and draw a few minutes of fame with an upset.

When teams break this narrative, like Butler did in 2010, SportsCenter needs a different narrative. The underdog, or Cinderella narrative comes into play, introducing binary opposition in more than just a winner/loser format into the narrative. The school from one of the six major conferences plays the role of Goliath, while the team from the outside becomes David. This allows ESPN to maintain its narrative, casting a team like Butler into a role that it did not deserve. Fans are given permission to identify with Butler, the underdog over a powerful force

like any school from one of the six major conferences. In fact, identifying with Butler is encouraged in this frame. But the narrative is not accurate. During the 2009-2010 season, Butler was ranked in the top 10 to 15 range. The team was ranked next to teams such as Villanova and Michigan State. While both of those teams received plenty of coverage from SportsCenter about their chances in the NCAA Tournament, Butler received none. Butler had two future NBA players on the team. Butler was on a winning streak. SportsCenter followed the traditional narrative. Butler was ignored and passed over as a team that should not be viewed as a possible championship team.

When Butler succeeded, ESPN had to cover them. The Cinderella narrative was invoked, enticing fans to identify with the underdog archetype. At the same time, Butler was othered. They were placed in a position outside of the top six conferences. Despite their success, they were not equal to teams from the top six. By othering Butler, ESPN was able to continue its narrative as the top six conferences as superior, although there was a popular upstart trying to slay the dragon. In reality, Butler did not, at the time, have the ability to slay the dragon as it pertained to ESPN's coverage. The favored paradigm remained the major six conferences. Butler fit in as an outcast. This research provided examples of Butler's portrayal as other. Butler was portrayed as a Cinderella team – the movie *Hoosiers* come to life. The 2010 season was one year that newspapers were following the agenda set by ESPN when it came to the NCAA bubble. Those newspapers followed the same narrative ESPN presented as Butler made its run.

Whether ESPN set the agenda or not, the narrative was that of Butler as a surprise. Even when the team was favored to defeat Michigan State in the Final Four, the dominant narrative set by SportsCenter (and followed by the newspapers) stated that Butler was the underdog. When

Duke prevailed in the championship game, even though Butler's last-second shot for a win went in and out, the frame reverted. Duke won. The world was right again. Fans who identified with Butler as underdog were not too disappointed, after all, the team exceeded expectations.

The Butler frame was much less about the success of the team than it was about power. Butler proved itself throughout the year but was ignored. As Butler continued to win in the tournament, the best way to maintain the structure was to portray Butler as something outside the narrative, or as a second part of a binary narrative. The favored teams, the power structure were portrayed as having to fend off a scrappy underdog. Framing Butler as an underdog that somehow kept winning was acceptable and maintained the hegemonic balance. Butler was given a place within the narrative. That place was as other. But it was not afforded the status of equal.

Even a year later, when Butler returned to the Final Four and the NCAA championship game, Butler was never framed as a powerhouse team. Butler does not play in the six major conferences. The dominant order cannot be changed to allow a team from outside of the six major conferences to be accepted as a powerhouse.¹¹ Instead, that team must fill a role in a binary system and is labeled as "other".

This research has many avenues of future research. One interesting avenue would be an examination of how ESPN frames teams that originally were in conferences outside of the top six but have been invited into the six major conferences because of conference realignment. How

¹¹ The exception to this is the Calipari rule. John Calipari, a high-powered coach with a strong media presence through media contacts and product endorsements, was able to coach the University of Memphis and turn that school into an ESPN-approved power

much will the change of conference affect how these teams are framed by SportsCenter? Another avenue of research would be an examination of the role basketball played in conference realignment. Football is most often cited as the reason for realignment, because the money available in football is much more than that available in basketball (the second sport still plays a role in realignment). Finally, an examination of whether the back-to-back success of Butler and Virginia Commonwealth University changed the narrative would be a strong possible study.

The research in this study worked because it played a role in tying together the effects study. Standing alone, one can recognize the role of effects studies. ESPN and SportsCenter do treat teams differently because of the conferences those teams are in. This study answered the question of why. ESPN creates a narrative that serves its financial goals of making the six major conferences more sustainable. The dominant narrative exists as a hegemonic tool – one that separates the haves from the have-nots in the world of college basketball. ESPN serves as the tool to enforce that narrative.

One could argue that SportsCenter's selection of these teams is purely common sense. But if one discounts years of conditioning from ESPN and newspapers, another possibility becomes possible. The expansion of the NCAA Tournament from 32 to 40 in 1979, from 40 to 48 in 1980, and from 48 to 64 in 1985 coincide with the rise of cable television and the rise of ESPN. As ESPN covered more games and gained more popularity, its narrative became more prominent. That narrative eventually was picked up by many newspapers across the country. That narrative states that schools from the major conferences (the conferences with large television

outside of the six major conferences. When Calipari left Memphis to coach at the University of Kentucky, SportsCenter returned to framing Memphis as a mid-major.

rights packages with ESPN) deserve to be in the NCAA Tournament. Average schools from these conferences receive more exposure, and more positive news coverage, than top schools from the other 25 conferences. This leads to a narrative that all accept as unfair, but one that is part of life: The bigger schools are more deserving. Like the answer to so many simple statements questioned by fact-checking agents, that statement is only partially correct. The reality is that much of the narrative is a media construct. Through years of repetition, conditioning, editorial laziness and monetary concessions, it has become easier to make this assumption. Not making this assumption means that media members must look for all quality teams from year to year. This becomes difficult when beats place sportswriters in a specific conference, and the choice beats place sportswriters in the top six conferences. ESPN hires analysts with knowledge of the six major conferences. Those analysts discuss the pros and cons of teams from those six conferences. They know them. It becomes easier for them to stay in their comfort zone. Fungibility – the ability to replace one brand with a similar brand from the same company – becomes the norm. The hegemonic function is in place. An unfair advantage exists in the NCAA men's basketball tournament.

IMPLICATIONS

The NCAA's statement that the best remaining 37 teams are to be selected for the NCAA Tournament after the original 31 qualify through automatic bids is not accurate. The goal of picking the best remaining teams is a difficult one, and it has been made more difficult by the impact of television. Exposure matters for teams wanting to earn an at-large bid. The more the committee sees a team, the better informed they are about that team's qualities. ESPN provides a service by being the largest broadcaster of games from all different conferences across its

networks. But because ESPN has a financial interest in the success of teams from certain conferences, the network's sports journalism/clips show, SportsCenter, provides information that is biased toward teams from the top six conferences. Since other forms of sports journalism are, at the least, aware of SportsCenter's information, a narrative that favors teams from the top six conferences becomes the norm.

This narrative must be challenged. The ability of the top teams in the six major conferences has never been challenged. But the ability of the average to mediocre teams from these conferences needs to be challenged. Shows such as SportsCenter need to hire at least one analyst with the job of covering the top teams from the other conferences. This could hurt the show's bottom line, though. ESPN has worked hard to make its product – college basketball – fungible. Adding teams to the mix outside of the six conferences would hurt that marketing strategy.

Websites already exist that concentrate coverage on teams from the other 25 conferences. Midmajority.com is one example of a website devoted to covering teams from outside of the top 25. One has to be a devoted fan to find a website such as midmajority.com.

The expansion of network television into cable could provide some form of relief for teams from outside of the top 25 conferences. ESPN's SportsCenter is the only national sports news program that currently reaches a large national audience. CBS and NBC have devoted money and time to sports-specific cable channels that may expand viewers' base of knowledge, but neither has started a national sports news program to rival SportsCenter. Fox, owned by NewsCorp, is considering a sports news program to challenge SportsCenter. The best remedy for

the narrative that SportsCenter creates is a program that will devote attention to the other conferences. A program that challenges the dominant narrative is needed.

Even with another program challenging SportsCenter, the dominant narrative has been established. The run by George Mason in 2006 to the Final Four and the success of Butler in 2010 and 2011, along with Virginia Commonwealth University, challenged that narrative. Continued success by teams outside of the six major conferences could force a change in the narrative. The outlook for that is still bleak. The differences in money, much from media, give the storied programs a large advantage. The payout formula by the NCAA rewards conferences that consistently place large numbers of teams in the NCAA Tournament. Butler, despite reaching the NCAA Tournament championship game in consecutive years, still didn't make enough money from the NCAA tournament as a Big East team. But, if for a number of years, 11 or 12 teams from the other 25 conferences qualified for the NCAA Tournament as at-large teams instead of the average of eight, a significant change would occur in how NCAA Tournament revenue is paid out. This would make a larger impact on the NCAA playing field than any other recommendation.

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