

Mythical Framing Messages in ESPN.com's Coverage of the NBA Finals Over 10 Years

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Abstract

This grounded research project examines mythical messages in ESPN.com's coverage of the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals through the lens of frame and agenda setting theories. During the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals series combined, ESPN.com (including the ESPN-owned Grantland.com and FiveThirtyEight.com) published a total of 52 articles. The idea of studying the NBA Finals through the lens of mythical framing came from purely empirical observations gathered as a spectator of the television broadcasts of the series, as multiple instances were noted of broadcasters comparing physical attributes and the skillsets of the players participating in the finals to those of superheroes and mythological beings. The complete census of 52 articles published by ESPN.com was analyzed. These articles included game recaps, feature stories, and game previews. This study revealed that there was significant evidence of mythical framing messages in the articles published by ESPN.com in their coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals, but not the 2005 NBA Finals. The relationship between Walt Disney Company-owned properties ESPN and Marvel Comics is observed. It is the belief of the researcher that the mythological framing elements will continue to play a large role in reporting major sporting events, especially as the Walt Disney Company continues to acquire and create new intellectual properties.

Keywords: Framing, Agenda Setting, Sport, Basketball, NBA, Superhero

During game four of the 2008 Eastern Conference Semifinals, Cleveland Cavaliers basketball player LeBron James used his unbelievable quickness to soar by two defenders, then rose into the air, seemingly flying, as he threw down a thunderous dunk over another pair of helpless defenders. The crowd immediately erupted and long-time National basketball Association (NBA) announcer, Kevin Harlan, delivered the most iconic line of his career:

"LeBron James with no regard for human life!"

It was clear in that moment that LeBron James was no ordinary man. He had done something unbelievable. He had done something that normal people are not supposed to have the physical capacity to do. He clearly had superpowers.

The idea of studying ESPN.com's coverage of the NBA Finals through the lens of mythical framing and agenda setting spawned from my childlike admiration of professional basketball players, as

well as from empirical observations I gathered as a spectator of the television broadcasts of the games. I noted multiple instances of broadcasters comparing the physical attributes and skillsets of the players participating in the finals to those of superheroes and mythological beings.

Studying messages delivered through ESPN.com-published articles (artifacts) is important because ESPN.com, Grantland.com, and FiveThirtyEight.com combine to register over 25 million visitors a day (Gaymoli, 2015). This number far surpasses the visitors from rival sports news websites SI.com and Yahoo Sports. It also makes ESPN.com frequented more often than major internet news outlets like CNN.com and The Huffington Post. The sheer mass of ESPN.com's audience provides enough reason for any of its published articles to be examined. Likewise, due to the worldwide following of the NBA, articles published about the NBA are being read by a more diverse audience.

Theory

Framing is often used in discussing news media reporting. Gamson and Modigliani (1987) explain that a frame is a, "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning" (p. 143). Pan and Kosicki (1993) describe framing as a, "strategy of constructing and processing news," in a way that reflects and operates in, "shared beliefs," "meanings," and "stories," of the intended audiences. To appropriately frame the grand spectacle that is the NBA Finals, news media have adopted a framing method through which their audiences can resonate with.

Agenda setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The two assumptions that lay at the front of agenda setting are that the media do not reflect reality, but instead filter and shape it, and that the media chooses to concentrate on a few issues and subjects, which in turn leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than others (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). The comparison of time frames is a critical aspect of agenda setting in news media communications. The aim of this study is to analyze the most widely accepted sports media source (ESPN.com) and decipher the characteristics of the framing and agenda setting techniques adopted by the ESPN.com journalists. While very little research about mythical messages in sports media currently exists, this research is consistent with the current literature on media framing and agenda building.

The 2005 NBA Finals

The 2005 NBA finals featured the San Antonio Spurs of the Western Conference and the Detroit Pistons of the Eastern Conference. This series featured the first matchup of the previous two NBA champions since the 1987 Finals, which was only the third time in NBA history this had ever happened. In one of the most intense championship series in the history of the NBA, the San Antonio Spurs emerged victorious as they defeated the Detroit Pistons, four games to three.

Despite the excitement surrounding the series, the 2005 NBA Finals actually hold the second-lowest television ratings of any NBA Finals in the past 16 years. It averaged only 12.5 million viewers per episode (TV by the Numbers, 2009). ESPN.com published 16 different stories in their coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals.

The 2015 NBA Finals

The 2015 NBA Finals were played between the Golden State Warriors of the Western

Conference and the Cleveland Cavaliers of the Eastern Conference. The 2015 NBA Finals also held historical significance for the National Basketball Association as the head coaches for both franchises were in their first year as head coaches in the NBA, which was the first time this had happened since the conception of the league. The series concluded after just six games, with the Golden State Warriors winning four games to two. I was one of the estimated 28,744,000 people that tuned into the deciding game six of the 2015 NBA Finals (Gaymoli, 2015). During the course of the 2015 NBA Finals, ESPN published a total of 36 articles through ESPN.com and the ESPN-owned Grantland.com and FiveThirtyEight.com.

Literature Review

American Journalist Walter Lippmann was the first scholar to introduce the concept of how the media can construct frames and set an agenda through which the audience interprets events (Lippman, 1922). In Lippman's publication, *Public Opinion*, theorized the view that the public responds not to actual events in the environment but to "the pictures in our heads," which he called the pseudo-environment. Of his work, Lippmann said,

"For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And altogether we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 16).

Through framing, the media is essentially offering a simpler model of news consumption by setting the agenda for the general public (Littlejohn, 2011). This illustrates how the concept of framing is closely associated with agenda setting, and both theories will be thoroughly utilized throughout this research.

Framing Theory

Renowned sociologist, Erving Goffman, introduced modern framing theory. In his article, "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience (published in 1974)," Goffman presented that frames are a set of concepts and theoretical perspectives that organize experiences and guide the actions of individuals. Goffman suggested that a given person interprets everything that is going on around him/her (their immediate world) through a primary framework, which is taken for granted by said person (Goffman, 1974).

Durham (1998) explains "when successfully

employed, as they generally are, frames make the world a more knowable and understandable” (p.100). According to Berkowitz (2005), the more “unusual and unexpected” an event is, the more journalists seek to explain it in a way that is “relatively familiar.” The motive behind this method is the ability of journalists to make their stories better resonate with their respective audiences. Frames represent “ideological” positions and “social narratives” through which journalism “create meaning” (Durham, 1998). Stories with particularly spectacular content, such as athletes performing unbelievable feats, need a frame through which journalists can provide some type of meaning in order to aid their audience in understanding and coping with the event. Fuglsang (2001) argues that journalists rely on “readily understood, interpretive frames” found in “ritual, myth, and metaphor” in order to develop frames (p. 185).

Much of the media’s ability to utilize agenda setting and framing theories is predicated on their credibility of particular issues (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). A media outlet that is thought of as highly credible has more power to guide the way an audience views an issue or event. Likewise, a media outlet with little credibility with a particular issue would have less ability to guide audience beliefs. For example, the Food Network, despite being a very credible source for all things cooking, would not possess the same ability as ESPN when people are looking for sports news.

Media Framing

Media framing refers to the process of putting a news story together, including the ways in which a story is organized and structured (Littlejohn, 2011). The way in which the media depicts events (frames them) can constrain how audiences interpret these events. This can happen by various textual features of the event, such as headlines, audio-visual components, metaphors used, and the way in which the story is told (Rhee, 1997, pp. 26-48).

In the book, “The Art of Framing,” the authors list seven popular techniques in which the media utilizes framing. These techniques are through: the use of metaphors, stories (narration), tradition, jargon, artifacts, contrast, and spin (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). A metaphor is used to frame a conceptual idea through comparison to something else. Stories, such as myths and legends, are used to frame a topic via narrative in a vivid and memorable way. Traditions are the cultural mores that imbue significance in the mundane. The use of artifacts, which is closely related to the use of traditions, involves objects with intrinsic symbolic value; a cultural phenomenon that holds more meaning than the

object itself. Slogan, jargon, and catchphrases are used to frame an object with a catch phrase to make it more memorable. Contrast is utilized to describe an object in terms of what it is not. And lastly, spin is used to present a concept in a way to convey a value judgment (positive or negative) that might not be immediately apparent (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996).

Media Framing in Sport

In the wide world of sports, framing plays an important role. Over the past several decades, media coverage of both professional and nonprofessional athletes has reached unprecedented levels (Lewis & Weaver, 2013). Because of this, it is important to examine the specific frames the media utilizes to shift how the general public views professional athletes. This specific research aims to clarify the area between media framing and the usage of mythological themes in journalism. A better understanding of these effects will allow the audience of the National Basketball Association to better form their own opinions of professional athletes, while simultaneously allowing scholars to better comprehend framing effects on the attitudes, intentions, and enjoyment of this audience within the sports media domain.

Agenda Setting Theory

Agenda-setting can best be defined as how the influence of the news media helps to determine an issue or topic’s importance in the audience’s mind (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). In its core, agenda setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). There are two basic assumptions of agenda setting. The first assumption is that the press and the media do not reflect reality, but filter and shape it instead. The second assumption is the media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those specific issues as more important than other issues (Rogers & Dearing, 1998).

Modern studies on agenda setting were first introduced in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, as they built on Cohen’s research and more fully developed those ideas. McCombs and Shaw were the first to use agenda setting theory to suggest that it is the media who sets a public agenda by telling their respective audiences what to think about (1972). Since 1972, McCombs and Shaw, along with many other scholars, have expanded on this theory and have continued to produce unique research about the agenda setting function of the media. In 1993, McCombs and Shaw claimed that media depictions can affect how people think about the news, and are “stunningly successful in telling

us what to think about" (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). In other words, agenda setting establishes what the salient issues or images in the minds of the public really are.

Agenda Setting in Sport

One of the primary goals of the sports media is to bring information about the sporting world to its respective audiences. This information can take many different forms. For example, immediately following Super Bowl 50 (played on Sunday, February 6, 2016, between the Denver Broncos and Carolina Panthers), two major stories surfaced: Denver Quarterback Peyton Manning winning a Super Bowl and retiring to seemingly "ride off into the sunset," and legendary quarterback Peyton Manning being involved in a sexual assault case while in college. In short, the media has the task of moving information from those who have it to those who need to be informed.

Research Questions

Considering the literature analyzed, ESPN.com's coverage of the NBA Finals meets the qualifications for being framed through mythical archetypes. The 2005 NBA Finals and the 2015 NBA Finals were chosen to examine because the Walt Disney Company purchase of Marvel Entertainment occurred during the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals' ten-year separation. Prior research conducted on the topics of news framing and agenda setting, when coupled with the results of the pilot study of this research, led to the formation of the following research questions.

RQ1: How were the players framed through mythical, heroic, or superhuman archetypes?

RQ2: What other rhetorical themes were present throughout the coverage?

RQ3: How were the 2005 & 2015 NBA finals framed differently?

RQ4: How did agenda setting contribute to the framing of the 2005 & 2015 NBA finals?

Methods

This study utilized grounded theory through the theoretical lens of mythical framing. Grounded theory is a qualitative research method utilized to develop theories by systematically gathering and analyzing field data. Rather than theorizing how a communicative process may work in practice, grounded theory evolves during actual research through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In their own words, Strauss and Corbin explained, "In this method, data collection,

analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another...the researcher will begin with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data. Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the 'reality' than is theory derived by outing together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Specifically, this study will utilize grounded theory to extract mythological themes present in ESPN.com's coverage of the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals. Each article that ESPN.com published about the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals was analyzed. I felt that grounded theory was best suited for this rhetorical analysis as subjectivism is not necessarily a data-corrupting issue. Instead of jumping into this study with a clear theory framework in mind, the initial stages of this study instead provided a sense of vision of where I would go with the research. In other words, the text and the extracted data guided this study, not the other way around

The complete 52-article census published by ESPN.com covering the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals was selected to serve as the texts for this study because they were delivered to a worldwide audience and received millions of views. By analyzing the complete census of articles ESPN.com published, this study can provide an accurate analysis of how ESPN.com's coverage of significant athletic sporting events is being framed. After the grounded research was conducted, results were compared through the lens of framing and agenda setting theories, drawing conclusions regarding the Walt Disney Company's ownership of other intellectual properties.

Results

The specific mythical archetypes present in the artifacts were organized into the following categories: Mythical Physical Attributes, Mythical Talent/Skillset, and Good vs. Evil. Open coding also led to the creating of additional categories, which were relevant specifically to the two different series. These additional categories will be discussed further.

Mythical Physical Attributes

The "Mythical Physical Attributes" theme represents a comparison or metaphor of a player's physical attribute to any mythical, heroic, or supernatural archetype. The most common usage of this archetype was explaining how the players were moving around the court. In the coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals, two strong examples exist of mythical framing of a player's physical attributes. In the first game of the series, it was written that San Antonio Spurs

guard Manu Ginobili “surged” into the lane by “bowling over (Detroit Piston center) Ben Wallace” (Associated Press, 2005a). Later in the article, again mentioned Ginobili, “driving the lane and again flattening Wallace” (Associated Press, 2005a). These instances were two of the only viable examples of mythical framing of a player’s physical attributes in the coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals.

In the 2015 NBA Finals coverage, the most common usage of this archetype was explaining how the players were moving around the court. Seth Curry was being assigned supernatural speed when the articles described him as, “super-quick,” and “darting” or “cruising” (Haberstroh, 2015a) his way to the basket. The most explicit description of this category came from the same article, which labeled LeBron James a physical, “freak (Haberstroh, 2015a).” One article even reached as far to label James a, “Modern day Goliath (Haberstroh, 2015b).” The physical attributes of LeBron James were the most frequently described using mythical archetypes.

Mythical Talent/Skillset

The other prevalent theme tied directly to mythical lore was the “Mythical Talent/Skillset” theme. This category included any mythical, heroic, or supernatural metaphor or representation of the talents and skills of any of the players participating in the NBA Finals. Both teams participating in the 2005 NBA Finals were subject to receiving “perfection” labels attached to various aspects of the respective teams. Referring to the defensive capabilities of the Detroit Pistons, then-ESPN journalist Bill Simmons wrote,

“they reminded me more of...the middleweight champ whose astonishing defensive skills suck the life out of his opponents...you find yourself thinking things like, ‘Will anyone ever land a punch on him? And, ‘If everyone fought like this, boxing would go out of business in five years. The Pistons’ defense was like that. And it nearly worked to the tune of back-to-back championships’” (Simmons, 2005).

The San Antonio Spurs received more blatant “perfection” labels, as multiple instances were recorded of journalists saying Spurs players did something perfectly. In the game recap of game seven of the 2005 NBA Finals, it was said, “... the Duncan-Ginobili combo clicked perfectly on two straight possessions. First, Ginobili drove the lane and drew Duncan’s defender, zipping a pass to Duncan all alone on the baseline for a 19-footer. Next, Duncan had three defenders collapsing on him when he saw Ginobili all alone at the 3-point line. The shot was perfect,

and San Antonio led 72-65 with 2:57 left” (Associated Press, 2005c).

The coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals also had multiple uses of the “Mythical Talent/Skillset” theme. One article stated that the things LeBron James was called on to do during this series were “unfathomable” (Haberstroh, 2015c). But it was Stephen Curry’s basketball talents that were the most frequently described using mythical framing. A quote from an article stated that Curry can, “Catch and shoot without even seeing the basket (Friend, 2015).” In that same article, one of Curry’s teammates said, “Steph can see things on the court that no one else can” and Curry’s “rapid-fire” jump shot was also cited (Friend, 2015).

Good vs. Evil

The “Good vs. Evil” archetype is an examination of the classic narrative of the forces of good battling against the forces of evil. This category includes mentions of injustice or painting a picture of a team or player being inherently righteous and/or good, while another team or player is inherently bad and/or evil.

In the coverage of the 2005 Finals there was no evidence of this archetype being used. Instead, there were multiple mentions of the 2005 NBA Finals featuring the last two NBA Champions squaring off. The teams were treated more as equals, rather than one being inherently “good” and the other inherently “bad.”

The coverage of the 2015 Finals did feature multiple instances of this archetype being pushed. One of the recaps of the series mentioned Golden State’s Andre Iguodala being a “knight in shining armor (Holmes, 2015),” implying that he helped save the day and allowed good to triumph over evil in the 2015 NBA Finals. Another article labeled the officiated of one of the games “criminal (McMenamin, 2015),” leading the reader to believe the wrong team won that specific game.

Other Themes of 2005 NBA Finals

Throughout the coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals, the San Antonio Spurs and the Detroit Pistons were commonly referred to as a reflection of each other. In his post-series profile, Scoop Jackson wrote, “It was about the teams being duplicates of each other...It was not about which team was better; but instead, which wanted it more...They paralleled each other. Possession for possession” (Jackson, 2005). Later in the article, Jackson again used this theme, writing, “The mirror image had finally found its reflection. The two best teams in the world had taken a seven-game series, turned it into a three-game series,

and then turned it into a one-game saga.”

Closely related to the teams being parallels of each other, was the frequent mentioning of the defensive intensity, physicality, and aggressiveness of the series. Both teams boasted similar attributes in terms of their playing style. The San Antonio Spurs' forward-center Tim Duncan was quoted as he spoke about the physicality of the series, saying, “We knew it was going to be like this; these guys are a heck of a defensive squad” (Associated Press, 2005a). After game four, a Detroit Pistons win, the San Antonio Spurs head coach Greg Popovich said, “It's disappointing that their physical play and their defense has taken us away from everything that we normally do” (Associated Press, 2005b).

The last theme that emerged through coding was the historical impact of the series. As previously mentioned the 2005 NBA Finals were only the third time in NBA history in which the past two champions squared off in the finals. ESPN.com also did not fail to mention multiple times that the 2005 NBA Finals were the first finals series to go to seven games since 1994. Of the significance of a game seven, Bill Simmons (2005) wrote, “As basketball fans, we knew Game 7 of an NBA Finals was the ultimate experience. Ninety minutes before tip-off, every fan has already found his or her seat...You can't possibly imagine the level of intensity, the overpowering electricity in the building, how it keeps going higher and higher.”

Other Themes of 2015 NBA Finals

The “Isolation of LeBron James” was a frequently used theme when describing why the Cleveland Cavaliers were struggling and losing games. This category included any rhetorical element that suggested LeBron James was playing on his own team, vastly outnumbered, or James being elevated in status above his teammates. One article stated, “LeBron James is not only the most single most important player to his franchise, no player has been leaned on to do more of the work for his franchise than James has throughout his career in Cleveland (Haberstroh, 2015c).” This is an example of LeBron James being isolated from the rest of his team. Another example of this was the frequent mention of LeBron James being forced to, “put his team on his back (McMenamin, 2015),” in order for the Cavaliers to succeed. The most frequent adjectives used to describe James' teammates were: “Least-talented,” “Mediocre,” and, “Superfluous” (Pain, 2015).

The depth of Golden State's roster and the amount of quality players on their team was another category that emerged during this study. In direct contrast to how the Cavaliers were

being described, the Warriors were described as a great all-around team, where every player contributed. One article stated that the Warriors', “boast on of the most talent roster from top to bottom that the NBA has ever seen” (Friend, 2015). Multiple articles also described the Warriors as a, “brotherhood,” and explained how they, “banded together to win an NBA Championship” (Friend, 2015).

The final category that emerged through analyzing these texts was the inexperience of the head coaches competing in the 2015 NBA Finals. Both head coaches, Steve Kerr of the Golden State Warriors and David Blatt of the Cleveland Cavaliers, were in their first season as head coaches in the NBA. This narrative played a significant role throughout the course of the 2015 NBA Finals as mistakes by both teams were frequently attributed to the fact that neither coach had much coaching experience. Assumptions that veteran coaches “wouldn't make this type of mistake (Strauss, 2015),” is an example of this.

Discussion

Mythical framing archetypes were present throughout the 52 articles that were analyzed. The mythical framing messages that were identified in the articles provided data and examples of how mythical framing contributed to the overall narratives of both the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals. However, there was a vast spike in the amount of mythical framing archetypes used in the coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals.

Specifically, I found that the mythical framing messages did not destroy the credibility of the article, nor did they distract from it. When used, the mythical framing messages served to more effectively explain a specific play or describe the state of the game. I found that these mythical metaphors caused me to have a greater interest in the game and play to which it was referring. One of the greatest advantages of utilizing mythical framing messages was the ability of the mythical messages to evoke feelings of emotion, which is especially powerful considering some of the articles that were analyzed were 10 years old.

Through the coding process, three categories that comprised all mythical archetypes present in the texts were identified as: Mythical Physical Attributes, Mythical Talent/Skillset, and Good vs. Evil. Coding also led to the identification of additional rhetorical categories, which were specific to the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals, respectively.

Mythical Framing

Assigning mythical or superhuman physical

attributes was the most common mythical framing element that was extracted from the texts. The assigning of supernatural or mythical physical capabilities to professional athletes is likely attributed to the fact that they can do things physically that “normal people” cannot. In this mindset, claiming that LeBron James can fly, instead of just being able to jump and leap very well, explains why James can do things that the journalist and his/her audience cannot. While everyone can acknowledge that LeBron James does not actually have superhuman abilities, it does offer an explanation (no matter how irrational it is) why he is so much more athletic than the general public. Throughout the 52-article census, LeBron James was by far the most frequent benefactor of this category. The vast majority of mythical physical attributes being assigned to a player were done in James’ favor. Standing 6’8” and 260 pounds, it’s not hard to imagine why he was described using mythical language. Aside from his grand stature, LeBron James can typically jump higher and run faster than anyone else on the court, as he is one of the most impressive physical specimens the NBA has ever seen. It is rare that the one of the biggest and heaviest players on the court is also the most athletic, to say the least.

Closely related to mythical physical attributes, the mythical talent or skillset category was utilized to describe the impressive way a player performs or performed on a certain play. The assigning of mythical talents to professional athletes gives readers a reason why these athletes can do things better than the rest of the public. There are likely people in this world who have played more basketball than LeBron James or Stephen Curry, yet they never made it to the NBA, just as there are those who have likely played and practiced piano more than Mozart, yet they never became famous pianists. Being able to point to the fact that Stephen Curry was somehow endowed with a superhuman ability to shoot three-pointers provided me with an explanation as to why he is in the NBA. Throughout the 52-article census, Curry was the athlete most frequently assigned mythical talents. His ability to shoot the basketball from great distances, as well as his ability to dictate the tempo of a game (court vision) could only be explained by his supernatural abilities.

Although it was present in multiple articles, the “Good versus Evil” archetype did not play as big of a role throughout the entire series as the other mythical framing categories. In fact, it was entirely absent in ESPN.com’s coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals. It wasn’t until the final game of the 2015 NBA Finals that this category emerged. It should be noted, however, that this theme continued on in the coverage after the series had concluded. This can likely

be attributed to the fact that ESPN and its journalists should stay somewhat objective in their coverage of major sporting events. I felt ESPN did this for most of the series; however, I found there to be an underlying feeling during the later articles that the “right” team won. But perhaps this was because I also felt the “right” team won.

Other Prevalent Themes in the 2005 NBA Finals

A common narrative throughout the coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals was how similar the playing styles of the San Antonio Spurs and Detroit Pistons were. While both teams featured their own “superstars,” both teams boasted a very strong “team-first” personality that they carried throughout multiple seasons. In 2003, the San Antonio Spurs faced off against the Jason Kidd-led New Jersey Nets. In 2004, the Detroit Pistons defeated the Shaq and Kobe Los Angeles Lakers. In both 2003 and 2004, the NBA Finals seemed to feature a “team” versus an “individual(s).” The faceoff in 2005 was framed as a perfect match of two perfectly balanced teams. Likewise, the San Antonio Spurs and Detroit Pistons were the two top defensive teams in the 2004–2005 season (Basketball-Reference, 2005a). Their styles were very similar, which led to ESPN.com journalist Scoop Jackson writing, “(This series) was about the teams being duplicates of each other...It was not about which team was better; but instead, which wanted it more...They paralleled each other. Possession for possession” (2005).

As previously mentioned, the 2005 NBA Finals were all about defense, physicality, and aggressiveness. The scores of the games, respectively, were: 84–69, 97–76, 96–79, 102–71, 96–95, 95–86, and 81–74. With the exception of game five, in which the San Antonio Spurs won 96–95 in overtime, every game featured one team playing stifling defense, which led to the opponent recording an unusually low score for an NBA playoff game. Aside from just playing great defense, this series was framed as a very physical and aggressive series which resembled a boxing match more than a basketball game (Simmons, 2005). The 142 personal fouls recorded by the San Antonio Spurs was only eclipsed by the Detroit Pistons’ 149 (Basketball-Reference, 2005b). This statistic certainly confirmed the appropriateness of the defense, physicality, and aggressiveness frame being applied to the 2005 NBA Finals.

Multiple times throughout the articles published about the 2005 NBA Finals by ESPN.com, the historical perspective of this series was brought to light. This series was just the third time in NBA history in which the previous two champions squared off in the finals. This fact was essential to the very identity of the 2005

NBA Finals, as it was framed to be a matchup of the two undisputed best teams in the world. There has yet to be another matchup of the two most recent champions since 2005. Another aspect of this frame being used was how frequently the articles about game seven and post-series articles mentioned the significance of the NBA Finals going to seven games. The NBA Finals going to seven games is a fairly rare occurrence, as it only happened three times in the previous twenty seasons (1984–2005). As ESPN.com journalist Bill Simmons said, “You can’t put a price on game seven” (2005). Other Prevalent Themes in the 2015 NBA Finals

LeBron James was often subject to a narrative of “LeBron versus the World.” Multiple articles, including a statistical breakdown, stated that LeBron James had carried his team to the 2015 NBA Finals without receiving much help. This narrative only intensified as he lost his all-star teammates, Kevin Love and Kyrie Irving, to injury during the playoffs. James being isolated certainly wasn’t slanderous to his abilities or character, but rather served to uplift him by demeaning the talents of his teammates. This served as an effective tool when describing how talented of a basketball player LeBron James is, going so far as to imply that he could lead any team to the NBA Finals. It also seemed to be used as an excuse for why LeBron James, who is widely regarded as the best basketball player in the world, did not win an NBA championship this year. Simply put, the Cleveland Cavaliers not winning the 2015 NBA Finals was not his fault; it was his teammates’. This theme almost served to make LeBron James look like a victim of tragic circumstances in the overall narrative of the 2015 NBA Finals.

The frequent mentioning of the Golden State Warriors’ great depth was in direct contrast to the isolation of LeBron James. Instead of isolating Golden State’s star player, Stephen Curry, the Warriors were celebrated for having so many players who were able to contribute meaningful minutes. In fact, even the fans of the Warriors were celebrated as the “sixth man” of the finals, and having a direct impact on the outcome of the series. The Warriors were truly celebrated as a team and lauded for their team-first culture. The combination of LeBron James being isolated and the Golden State Warriors’ depth being celebrated painted the picture of a great player facing off against a great team, which has proven to be true.

The inexperience of the two head coaches facing off in the 2015 NBA Finals was also an attempt of the journalists to explain why certain events were transpiring. As previously mentioned, the 2015 NBA Finals marked the first time that two rookie head coaches were squaring off against

each other since the NBA’s inaugural season. While both coaches had been around the game of basketball for many years (Steve Kerr as a player and executive, David Blatt as a coach in Europe), neither had any prior NBA coaching experience. This theme played a very important role in the overall narrative of the 2015 NBA Finals because it was a significant monument in NBA history, and something that will likely never happen again. It was interesting, however, that while both coaches were being celebrated for reaching this milestone during the first year of their careers, their inexperience was often pointed at to explain why their respective teams were struggling throughout the series.

Evidence of Agenda Setting

In his book, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, Bernard 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). This foundation of agenda setting theory was along the same lines of my observations in regards to ESPN.com’s coverage of the NBA Finals. There was a clear increase in the amount of mythological language and archetypes used in the coverage of the NBA Finals from 2005 to 2015. This shift was not as evident in the game recaps published by the Associated Press as it was in the feature articles written by ESPN.com journalists.

Media bias has been under scrutiny since the earliest beginnings of journalism. The frames used by those reporting news can have an effect upon the reader, further turning their viewpoint toward or away from that of the author. Davis and Kent state, “framing theory and research directly challenge the notion that news stories can and should be objective. Social constructionism asserts that there is no objective social reality that can be described using traditional reporting practices. The social world is constructed and this construction is constantly being negotiated” (2013). If objectivity cannot be achieved, then bias in ESPN.com coverage of major sporting events must also exist in some form or another.

This research strongly suggests that ESPN.com has made a conscious effort to use mythological language and archetypes in its coverage of major sporting events, such as the NBA Finals. While references to specific intellectual properties owned by the Walt Disney Company were not measured, it is my belief that the acquisition of Marvel Comics by the Walt Disney Company has directly impacted the language that is used by ESPN.com journalists. With little doubt, agenda setting contributed to the framing of ESPN.com’s coverage of the 2015 NBA Finals by employing

mythological archetypes throughout the series.

Conclusion

The mythical framing elements in ESPN.com's coverage of the 2005 and 2015 NBA Finals were an effective tool in reporting these major events. This research leads me to believe that mythological framing elements will continue to play a large role in the coverage of major sporting events because mythological archetypes help describe why certain events transpire and create vivid images for readers of the articles. These elements, when combined with the readership and overall reach of ESPN.com, warrant further study.

This research strongly suggests that ESPN.com has made a conscious effort to use mythological language and archetypes in its coverage the 2015 NBA Finals. While there was evidence of mythological framing found in the coverage of the 2005 NBA Finals, it was not consistent throughout the 16-article census, nor do I believe it would bear statistical significance if a content analysis were conducted. This data leads me to believe that ESPN.com made a conscious effort to force readers of the articles published about the 2015 NBA Finals to think about mythological themes, such as themes found in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the Star Wars Extended Universe, and other intellectual properties owned by the Walt Disney Company.

The methods used in this study bring considerable strength as well as some limitations. This study was strictly rhetorical, which served to answer the research questions and purpose of the study. However, further research on the topic of mythical framing in ESPN.com's coverage of the NBA Finals should be conducted, starting with a content analysis of the texts examined through this study. In his 2009 publication, "Arguing for a General Framework for Mass Media Scholarship," James Potter argues that media scholars need to blend textual analysis (concerned with narrative arcs in stories) and content analysis (concerned with general patterns across large numbers of messages). This project could do precisely that, and I have every intention of doing so.

Sports media, specifically ESPN and ESPN.com, will undoubtedly continue to grow in popularity. For this reason alone, it is important to study the effect it has on the public. While sports media may not carry heavy implications, such as that of political developments or wartime coverage, that should not diminish its importance. ESPN and sports media as a whole are in constant competition with all other news outlets for relevance and the attention of the public. It is my belief that ESPN will continue to grow in

popularity and will continue to successfully utilize its website, ESPN.com, in shaping what its audience should think about through framing and agenda setting theories.

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