

SPORTS NEWS AND NETWORK RIGHTS:  
BALANCING A CONFLICT OF INTEREST  
A CONTENT ANALYSIS  
A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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BY  
BRANDAN M. ALFORD  
ADAM J. KUBAN  
BALL STATE UNIVERSITY  
MUNCIE, INDIANA  
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## Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

This study attempted to determine the influence that sports-broadcast agreements have on the presentation of sports news in a journalistic capacity. The two largest television sports networks in terms of viewership and broadcast agreements in the United States are Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) and Fox Sports 1 (SportsTVRatings.com, 2015). Both of these networks have numerous, multi-million-dollar agreements with various professional sports leagues and collegiate conferences to broadcast their events. Simultaneously, both networks have a schedule of news and analysis programs that air daily. These news programs are presented as unbiased outlets designed to work in the same capacity as nightly or morning broadcast programs on local news channels; however, they focus entirely on sports.

Journalistic integrity is one issue that arises when discussing these programs and the editorial decisions that are made. Within ESPN, as well as Fox Sports 1, there are competing interests across the network. On one side exists the news programming that is designed as an impartial presenter of the sports news of the day; on the other is the broadcasting side, which works to procure the lucrative rights agreements with sports leagues and conferences that bring with them a seemingly endless revenue stream of advertisements.

The issue of separation between journalism and broadcast programming on these networks, especially ESPN, is one that has been a topic of conversation in popular media for some time. Media critics such as Richard Deitsch at *Sports Illustrated* and ESPN's own ombudsmen have criticized this apparent conflict of interest in recent years. In 2008, Le

Anne Schreiber, then ESPN's ombudsman, addressed ESPN's coverage bias (Schreiber, 2008). But the issue recently resurfaced when ESPN, a rights holder for National Football League (NFL) games, pulled its partnership with a PBS documentary chronicling the issue of concussions in the NFL that was especially critical of the League. It was a decision that was viewed by many as a conflict of interest (Ohlheiser, 2013).

The concussion issue involving ESPN is the quintessential situation where the network was caught between its journalistic coverage of an issue and its fiduciary relationship with a major sports league. On one hand, ESPN was involved with PBS to cover an extensive, important story on the long-term effects of head trauma and concussions in the National Football League (Weprin, 2012); meanwhile, ESPN maintained a long-standing broadcast relationship with the NFL (Coddington, 2013), which could be negatively impacted by such reporting which would paint the NFL and its player-safety protocols in a negative light. While PBS's *Frontline* and ESPN's "Outside the Lines" had prepared to cover the issue jointly for nine months, ESPN decided to end the relationship and withdraw its participation in *Frontline*'s documentary about the issue in August 2013, a little over a month before the project was scheduled to air (PBS, 2013).

The situation was covered extensively by major news outlets and even by ESPN's ombudsman at the time, Robert Lipsyte. In his column on the issue, Lipsyte (2013) quoted ESPN President John Skipper on the seemingly conflicting priorities of journalism and programming. Skipper noted, "I am the only one at ESPN who has to balance the conflict between journalism and programming" (Lipsyte, 2013, p. 1). This issue of balancing those two components of ESPN's operation, as well as Fox Sports 1's, is the initial focus of this study.

In the decades preceding the inception of Fox Sports 1 — as well as comparable networks created by NBC and CBS — ESPN was able to create a news programming rundown independently without any competition or comparative analysis. Whichever stories ESPN deemed to be news was a viewer’s only option for major network sports news coverage. Over the years, Lipsyte, Schreiber and others have raised questions about journalistic integrity and the ability to effectively separate news production from broadcast contract relationships; however, there was no substantive way to evaluate whether ESPN’s journalistic decisions on programming such as *SportsCenter* were impacted in any way by broadcast agreements with professional or collegiate conferences and leagues. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature with regard to ESPN and a comparison against comparable, competitive sports news networks as a means to determine whether there is a significant difference in the coverage these networks afford to leagues, conferences, and teams that have broadcast agreements with each network.

### **Introduction/Background**

The evolution of media in all forms in the past decade has changed the way audiences consume information and where they go for that information. Print media have been co-opted by internet publications and digital formats; radio broadcasts have transitioned from home and car stereos to mobile radio apps and digitally downloaded podcasts, and television shows of all varieties have slowly shifted from “appointment” television with a set date and time to streaming services such as Hulu and Netflix, which operate at a viewer’s leisure, and the advent of “viral” videos that allow a show to live as minutes-long segments on the internet. However, one aspect of media consumption

remains steady in its platform even as changes evolve around it: live television sports-broadcasts.

Even as broadcast networks add online streaming options for out-of-market events and second-screen viewing capabilities, sporting events remain one of the strongest elements of live television (Wenner, 1998). Even as cable subscriptions have faced competition, their relative strength is still bolstered by the presence of live sports. “The power of sports is the leading reason the bundle exists today and [why] the bundle is as big as it is” (Wertheim, 2013). This is evidenced by *Sunday Night Football* ranking as the No. 1 show in American television in 2013, garnering nearly one million more viewers than second-place *American Idol*. That ranking continues a trend over the past decade that has seen *Sunday Night Football* steadily climb the rankings including top-three finishes each of the past four years, as well as firsts in both 2012 and 2013 (Patten, 2013). These successes display why “[cable packages] have been a boon to sports, increasing exposure on new tiers of channels and, more important, creating wealthy cable networks that have used those riches to pay record rights fees” (Wertheim, 2013).

In 1980, media mogul Ted Turner launched Cable News Network, or CNN, as the first 24-hour news network in television history. In the 35 years since its launch, CNN has reshaped television news and the way networks of all sizes deliver news to audiences, from local and regional affiliate networks to major networks such as ABC, NBC, and CBS. Today’s version of broadcast television in the 24-hour-news-cycle era traces its roots to the original 24-hour news network: CNN. One of the issues posited by Agenda Setting Theory is the idea that the perceived salience of a story can be impacted by news coverage. This argument, which has been debated by communications scholars such as Robinson (1999), Jones

(2003), and Gilboa (2005), is grounded in the belief that a news network's decision to cover a story actually influences consumers about its perceived importance. Scholars are divided on this issue, which is colloquially known as the "CNN Effect," with some such as Gilboa (2005) believing that its supporters have exaggerated its effects.

The theory, which dates back to the Cold War era (Robinson, 1999), is rooted in the contention that the immediacy and rapid speed of contemporary media have a direct impact on political decisions and more specifically foreign policy issues. Robinson (1999) argued that the changing landscape of broadcast media and the instantaneous consumption of news and information by viewers created a perception through news stories that help to shape opinions and decisions that public officials ultimately make with regard to foreign policy. Follow-up studies by Gilboa (2005), Cohen (2008), and Cushion (2010) have reinforced the impact that CNN's 24-hour news cycle has had on contemporary political issues. Even though it may not have the global impact of international politics, sports television networks can have a similar impact on its viewers – every day fans make decisions on which teams to follow, how important a player is to a given league, or whether a sport is worth following on a week-to-week and year-to-year basis. But are those decisions driven by the importance viewers place on them individually, or are they shaped by the sports television they consume on a daily basis?

A year before CNN's inception in 1980, another startup television network was being created. Just like CNN, this new product would have 24 hours of airtime to fill. However, this new network would be dedicated to broadcasting sporting events and covering sports news – first focused regionally in the northeastern part of the United States, but eventually from around the country, and at times the world. Bill Rasmussen, the

co-founder and first president of ESPN, and several partners watched as their network debuted on September 7, 1979, naming it the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network; but today its known world-wide by its acronym: ESPN. The network originally intended to focus on sports and teams located in the New England area, close to its offices in Bristol, Conn. However, that network would soon turn to a more national focus (Kischefsky, 2011, p. 4). Today ESPN carries the nickname “the worldwide leader in sports,” and it has had a revolutionary impact on the way sports television is delivered. For over 30 years, ESPN remained the lone viable sports television network, arguably never having any real competition.

However, recent years have seen the market grow to include several fledgling sports networks, and one in particular that would attempt to compete directly with ESPN. On August 17, 2012, Fox Broadcasting Company launched its own sports network on the heels of similar moves by CBS and NBC that have rolled out sports-dedicated networks in the past two years. However, unlike NBC and CBS, Fox’s network was designed to challenge ESPN, competing with it for broadcast-rights contracts and developing news and analysis programming aimed to directly challenge some of ESPN’s longstanding programs, even if it didn’t stack up initially. “It’s hard to see [Fox Sports 1], at least at this early date, as an ESPN-killer in the venue of live sports telecasts. The growing rivalry between the two, however, may soon become just as exciting as the live programming the networks air nightly” (Smith, 2013).

While NBC and CBS’s networks initially made attempts to compete with ESPN, those efforts were unsuccessful for a number of reasons; most notably, neither network was able to expand its existing portfolio of broadcast deals. Both networks already had a lineup of

second-tier products – mid-major basketball conferences for both networks, the NHL for NBC Sports, among others – but neither was able to challenge ESPN for coveted deals with the National Basketball Association, major NCAA football conferences and others. In some cases, both networks were fighting just to keep the contracts they already had instead of focusing on new content. Other struggles that both of these networks faced were a lack of awareness and clear branding. In many cases, potential audience members were unsure what these networks were expected to provide, and even when that was clear, there were issues with finding which channel these networks were on (Koo, 2013).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Broadcast networks' successes are largely determined by their ratings. Building an audience, as well as brand loyalty, is integral in whether a network can collect on potential advertising revenues and earn an all-important piece of the market share of today's competitive television media (Storey, 2009). In order to understand how to gain the necessary viewership to succeed in broadcast media, one must first tackle the issue of whether the target audience or the media establish importance, and therefore drive the content being produced and disseminated.

ESPN, along with any other media outlet, must establish credibility with its audience in order to ensure a trust factor with its targeted viewers. Kischefsky (2011) addressed this in his article "ESPN and the Agenda Setting Theory," arguing that without credibility, a media outlet's audience will not be impacted by the news that is presented. However, if that credibility is established, Kischefsky states the audience views the stories, analyses, and presentation by the media as highly accurate, truthful, and worthy of belief.

Media outlets serve as the intermediary between information and the public. This relationship is referred to as "gatekeeping" in communications studies. For any story or news program, there are a number of gatekeepers that impact what information is disseminated and how. The list of gatekeepers may include the assigning editor, the reporter, any content editors and finally the production team before a host or on-scene reporter presents the information to the audience (Kischefsky, 2011). When analyzing this gatekeeping process, one way to approach the subject is through investigating how an

outlet goes through the decision-making process of what information to provide and how. These are known as media-effects studies.

Three mass communication theories pertaining to media effects deal with this issue of content priority: Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming. Each of these three theories addresses the relationship between consumers and producers of content. These theories also consider whether the media have a limited effect on its audience or if the particular media have a larger impact on topical priority and relevance in popular culture.

Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming all deal with the cognitive responses that audience members have to messages presented by the media. Agenda Setting assumes that the importance the media puts on certain events will have a direct correlation to how the audience will perceive of those same events (Weaver, 2007; McCombs, 2005). Priming, which is consistently linked to Agenda Setting, asserts that the media instruct their audience on how to evaluate an issue. This is attempted by using the amount of coverage or the context with which a topic is discussed in order to influence how the audience perceives a topic or its importance. Framing theorizes that the way a person, group, or issue is portrayed by the media will have a direct impact on the way that an audience perceives that item (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

In order to properly distinguish between three theories that are traditionally linked, it is necessary to articulate the integral concepts of each of the three theories in order to apply them properly. While Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming all share similarities as media-effects theories, there are differences among them as well. Agenda Setting and Priming are consistently paired when comparing the trio of theories, while Framing is usually contrasted against the other two (Weaver, 2007). The biggest difference in regards

to news presentation between Agenda Setting and Framing lies in desired results. “How forces and groups in society try to shape a public discourse about an issue by establishing predominant labels is of far greater interest from a framing perspective than from a traditional agenda-setting one” (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007, p. 5).

While Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming each cater to a different scope of news research, understanding their relationships to one another can better serve a study’s findings. One must not be sacrificed in service of another, and they are certainly not mutually exclusive facets of news research. “I see these areas of communication research as interconnected and as involving some similar, although not identical, cognitive processes and effects” (Weaver, 2007, p. 142). Weaver comes to this conclusion based upon previous research he has done in the field, discovering that “focusing on framing does not necessarily mean discarding the findings of much agenda-setting research that is more concerned with which issues are emphasized (or *what* is covered) than *how* such issues are reported and discussed” (Weaver, 1997, p.3).

One aspect of sports television viewing that differs from regular television viewing – similar to the difference between Agenda Getting and Framing – is recognizing the motivations of viewers. “Understanding that television viewing can be based on the audience’s leisure time, television partners will try to ... capitalize on the ritualized nature of television viewing,” (Rasner and Shropshire, 2011, p. 277) for regular television viewing. On the other hand, sports television broadcasters have other factors to consider. Rather than simply an adherence to a schedule, sports fans watch their favorite teams because of an emotional attachment to the teams and players in which they invest their time and money. “Understanding some general characteristics of the sports audience contributes to

developing the proper television programming schedule. The sports audience has been described as very loyal and watching sports has been found to satisfy emotional needs” (Fortunato, 2008, p. 35). It is in *how* the fans react to their teams and favorite players as they are televised as much as which teams and players are televised. This distinct difference helps shed light on what motivates network executives when assembling a broadcast agenda (Fortunato, 2008).

With these differences in mind, a study on ESPN and Fox Sports 1’s broadcast agenda would best be served within the theoretical framework of Agenda Setting. While the other two media effects theories are consistently grouped with Agenda Setting, this study focuses exclusively on Agenda Setting and it’s potential impact on sports television news.

### **Agenda Setting Theory**

The media prioritizes content, constantly serving as gatekeepers to information, deciding what stories will run, how they will be framed, and providing long-term associations between stories and ideas all while establishing values through the development of an agenda (McCombs and Shaw, 1993). Prior to McCombs and Shaw’s work on the 1968 presidential election, the limited-effects model had prevailed in mass communication theory, with many researchers believing that the direct impact of the media upon its audience was limited to the effect that opinion leaders had through interpersonal communication.

In the first few years following McCombs and Shaw’s initial study on the theory, researchers such as Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller (1980), as well as Zucker (1978) argued that the media attempted to match its broadcast agenda or schedule with the issues

that were believed to be the most salient in the minds of the audience. This perspective on media and audience meeting in the middle – both parties impacting content decisions – represented the first step toward acknowledging the direct impact that the media can have on audience perception and opinion-forming processes.

In the 25 years between McCombs' and Shaw's first findings on Agenda Setting theory (1973) and their subsequent published work on the theory, the pair found that the framing of an agenda by a media entity do not simply shape what news or content is consumed by the audience but also has the potential for psychological and behavioral effects. One of the most popular cognitive effects related to Agenda Setting Theory is accessibility, which implies that the more frequently a topic is viewed or consumed, the more easily its memory is accessed (Iyengar, 1990). Therefore, the more frequently a story is covered by the media, the more likely that story's topic is considered important in a viewer's mind because those memories are most prominent in his or her mind. It is in this and other potential cognitive effects that Agenda Setting Theory is centrally based.

Media effects theories — including Agenda Setting and Framing — have been consistently used throughout the four decades since McCombs' and Shaw's first study. However, there have been those who question the impact that Agenda Setting has on the audience and whether its effects have been exaggerated. These critiques parallel those made by researchers of the "CNN Effect."

One such critique, by Protess et al. (1985), conducted research on the impacts that investigative reports had on audience members regarding the subjects covered, running a pair of analyses. Protess and his colleagues entered the study believing that previous research had produced inconclusive results on Agenda Setting's validity. "The strength of

causal relationship between media content and public agendas has been found to vary considerably from study to study as have the methodologies used by different researchers” (Protess et al., 1985, p. 1). After finishing the second analysis, Protess and his colleagues were unable to come to any substantive conclusion that contradicted the impacts of Agenda Setting. “The disparity in findings between the two analyses leaves little room to make conclusions about the complex questions associated with agenda building” (Protess et al. 1985, p. 35). The group determined that more work would need to be done on the subject.

In fact, more work would continue in the field of Agenda Setting by a number of researchers, which included Ebring (1980), Hill (1985), and Protess (1985), as well as the original authors of the theory, several decades after their initial work in North Carolina. More contemporary research in this field has included work done by Tewksbury (2007), Takeshita (2006), Weaver (2007), Scheufele (2000) and Freeland (2012).

In 1993, when Shaw and McCombs published again on the issue of Agenda Setting, they established a core of four stages of agenda setting that evolved over the 25 years since their initial findings on the relationship between salience of story and audience response.

The first was to replicate their original findings on the *basic agenda-setting hypothesis*. The second was to investigate the *contingent conditions* that enhance or limit media agenda setting. Agenda setting entered its third phase ... extended the idea of agendas into two *new domains*. Research from agenda setting’s four phase, work focused on the sources of the *media agenda*, appeared in the marketplace. (McCombs and Shaw, 1993, p. 59)

Therefore, audience members’ consumption of media contents is not simply an information-processing exercise. What media outlets an audience member chooses, as well

as what messages he or she prioritizes, shape the cognitive structures of not only *what* information is processed, but also *how* that information is processed. However, the order of this process can become problematic as it creates a situation where a quandary arises: whether the audience's method of processing the information directly influences the editorial decisions of media organizations or the media organizations' editorial decisions impact how their audiences consume the information presented.

One of the most important aspects of Agenda Setting theory is the perceived salience of media topics. Understanding that salience is the beginning step in analyzing what content is prioritized both from a media and audience perspective. The ability of a mass medium to successfully convey an agenda is determined by its ability to transfer a determined salience, or importance, by the media and have it adopted by its consuming audience members. Sonski (1996) has defined Agenda Setting theory as the combination between the media attempting to dictate what stories or topics are most important and prioritizing that importance in how the media presents the story or topic in its broadcasts. This is done in order to have an impact on public opinion.

This concept of trickle-down salience can be a by-product of the mass media assigning a higher priority to a particular story and that high priority staying with audience members in their mindset and continuing through conversations between audience members who consume similar media types. That characterization of Agenda Setting was shared by the work of Seltzer and Mitrook (2009) as well as Fortunato (2008).

While Agenda Setting Theory focuses on the direct effects of media on audience members, the prioritizing of media content may also have indirect effects as interpersonal interactions allow audience members another forum through which story salience may be

discussed and adapted. The work of early theorists such as Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller (1980), as well as Zucker (1978) focused largely on story salience as being the primary factor within Agenda Setting.

However, contemporary research on this theory has provided an expanded view on salience and the process by which it is accomplished. Weaver (2007) built upon the work of McCombs and Shaw by identifying two levels of salience for media coverage of a story.

There are numerous similarities between Weaver's second-level salience and framing.

Whereas the 'first level' of agenda setting is focused on the relative salience of issues or subjects, the 'second level' examines the relative salience of attributes of issues.

These agendas of attributes have been called 'the second level' of agenda setting to distinguish them from the first level that has traditionally focused on issues (p. 142).

Rather than simply addressing what issues are salient, second-level analysis goes into the values of those issues: how the media presents those issues and stories and how the audience receives the story's information and whether it has any impact on the audience's feelings or opinions; namely, on whether it improves perceived salience.

These qualities of second-level analysis are the foundations of framing; both internal and external factors impact how news is delivered and received. But the basic tenet is that the ways in which stories are presented by the media have an impact on the attitudes and feelings that audience members have after receiving the stories (Vreese, 2005).

This theory can provide effective analysis of the content that media produce and disseminate because it has "a steady historical growth in its literature, an ability to integrate a number of communication research subfields under a single theoretical

umbrella ... and [has] a continuing ability to generate new research problems across a variety of communication settings” (McCombs and Shaw, 1993, p. 58-59).

Agenda Setting theory helps explain the power of news outlets to impact the importance, or salience, of a news item. By covering a story more frequently or prominently, a publication or television station can attempt to influence how an audience perceives that information. With that in mind, this study attempts to determine whether broadcast agreements drive a network’s decision to make a story or team more salient. Is there a positive correlation between the presence of broadcast agreements and more news coverage?

This study was grounded in Agenda Setting because as a network gives more coverage to a particular league, it potentially increases that league’s salience and can in turn drive up viewership for that league’s live events. ESPN and/or Fox Sports 1 may broadcast these events. Both of these networks have a vested, financial interest in driving up ratings for these broadcasts and may be using their news outlets to do so through increased news coverage.

This potential for journalistic decisions being shaped or influenced by broadcasting interests would be a direct contradiction of the stated business practices by ESPN and Fox. ESPN’s John Skipper and others have routinely stated that journalism and broadcast priorities are not competing interests when contemporary journalists and researchers have raised previous questions over the years.

## **Prior Research**

Agenda Setting by the media is a topic that has been researched and utilized throughout the past four decades since McCombs and Shaw published their initial research.

However, the major concepts expressed in the theory predate even that initial study by the duo. Bernard Cohen (1963) argued about the influence the media had on an audience's thinking in the early 1960s. Following McCombs's and Shaw's study in 1972, most work has focused on the political realm, most specifically with regard to election cycles, tracking the political campaigns of particular candidates and how the coverage of these campaigns impacted the viewing audience and the voting electorate.

In addition to the original study by McCombs and Shaw (1972) and their work with Weaver in 1997, there have been further studies utilizing Agenda Setting politics, including the work by Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller (1980). The trio published a study on the effects of political news on audience members based on their interest level in politics. But this area of research has expanded over the years to include various media genres, including sports in the past decade.

A portion of McCombs and Shaw's initial study (1972) employed content analysis of presidential candidates and the content's effects on North Carolina's voting electorate. Using the number of campaign news-focused stories on each particular issue for each candidate, McCombs and Shaw were able to quantify which campaign issues were perceived as more salient than others. Over a decade later, Goldenberg, Miller, and Erbring (1980) used a content analysis to analyze political issue priority. The trio utilized "an analysis of 'most important national problem' mention[ed] in the 1974 National Election Study, augmented by data on front-page content in the newspapers read by respondents" (Erbring, Goldenberg, 1980, p. 16).

McCombs and Shaw's study on the 1968 Presidential election in North Carolina has had an impact on media studies for nearly five decades and has provided a model for

communications research in not only public policy but all aspects of media coverage. “Since that election, the principal findings in Chapel Hill ... [have] been replicated in hundreds of studies worldwide. These replications include both election and non-election settings for a broad range of public issues” (McCombs, 2005, p. 1).

Just as politics and elections have attracted mainstream media attention for at least the past century, sports have created a niche in the national consciousness. The advent of the internet and 24-hour news cycle have afforded print, broadcast, and digital media an opportunity to specialize their coverage and cater to a continually growing market of sports fans interested in following the news about their favorite players and teams much like the candidates and political parties that McCombs and Shaw studied.

The field of Agenda Setting study with regards to sports coverage is not limited to television networks and their broadcasts, as studies have been conducted on individual sports, researching the amount and what kind of coverage each receives (Eagleman, 2008). This type of research provides a useful counter-perspective for research on entire networks, which have a much broader view. In 2008, Eagleman’s study focused on Major League Baseball players and their portrayal in the national media. The study sought to discover whether players were covered in the media more for their on-field performance or based on their nationality and race.

The research found that while half of the athletes covered most consistently by the media were among the league’s “best” (predetermined by an existing list), the other half of media coverage centered around existing stereotypes on racial differences and how a player’s race may fit a larger narrative on work ethic, talent levels, and relevance (Eagleman, 2008).

This content analysis of media coverage showed that there might exist a coverage bias that involves networks promoting or covering individual athletes, or teams, that it wants to have a greater perceived salience by the audience.

Historically, several previous studies on Agenda Setting have utilized content analysis as the means by which to evaluate and quantify agendas established by major media outlets, including research dating back to studies by Iyengar and Behr (1985) and more recently by Tewksbury (2007) as well as Coleman and Wu (2010).

The topic of ESPN's broadcast trends has been the subject of several previous research projects. Most recently, Kischefsky (2011), Clavio and Pedersen (2007), and Choi (2002) have addressed the issue of Agenda Setting and second-level analysis with regard to ESPN and its broadcast trends. For the most part, prior research on ESPN has had a specific focus, most commonly on gender bias and the coverage of women's sports compared to their male counterparts (Clavio & Pedersen, 2007). Furthermore, there have been studies on specific sports and how various media outlets have structured their coverage of that sport, specifically with regards to agenda setting (Eagleman, 2008).

While previous research exists from the past four decades on Agenda Setting and even more specifically applying it to ESPN, there is a gap with regards to ESPN's broadcast agenda. Any previous research on ESPN's television product has been limited by the lack of comparable, competitive networks (Clavio & Pedersen, 2007; Choi, 2002; and Kischefsky, 2011). Most research has traditionally centered on print content or the coverage of a specific sport (see Ebring et al., 1980; Eagleman, 2008; and Fortunato, 2008). This study, which will analyze and compare ESPN and Fox Sports 1's content, will begin to fill this void, providing a baseline study on not only the broadcast tendencies of ESPN as it relates to

existing broadcast-rights contracts but also how that agenda compares with another network.

As the world of sports networks continues to evolve, the prior research in this field becomes outdated and creates limitations for the conclusions drawn from their findings. Competition from similar networks owned by NBC, Fox, and CBS are creating competition for a field that had previously been owned nearly completely by ESPN's niche of a 24-hour sports television network. In the past, ESPN's only form of broadcast competition had come in the form of periodic network broadcasts of live events by CBS, NBC, and Fox as part of a larger, diverse programming schedule. These new networks will soon provide competition for broadcast-rights deals for many of the sports that ESPN has acquired with more ease in the past.

This newfound competition could have several impacts on ESPN's strategy for acquiring and broadcasting various sports, teams, and organizations. First, new rival networks could begin covering the smaller, more niche sports that have historically received less attention from ESPN. Second, these networks, with many millions already invested in them, could attempt to acquire the rights to major sports leagues. A third possibility is that these additional networks could prevent ESPN from essentially sub-leasing games from other networks who did not have the airspace or broadcast availability to properly utilize their broadcast deals for particular sports.

An example of the latter-most impact could potentially be NBC's recent acquisition of English Premier League soccer, which occurred in the fall of 2013. A deal estimated at around \$250 million by NBC has taken the rights to a league and its games that had previously been owned by Fox, which shared many of its weekly broadcasts with ESPN for

additional national exposure (Ourand, 2013). Now, ESPN will not have access to a sport and league that has shown significant growth in the United States in recent years.

Examples of prior research on ESPN's Agenda Setting by Kischefsky (2011), and Eagleman (2008), as well as Schreiber (2008), Choi (2002), and Clavio and Pedersen (2007) consistently cited the lack of competition as one of the major factors preventing researchers from effectively analyzing ESPN's programming decision-making process and the priorities that shape who and what are broadcasted. With the creation of Fox Sports 1, a comparison can now be made as to whether ESPN's content decisions are comparable to competitors or external considerations – such as broadcast agreements – shape which stories are told. While the sports network offerings by NBC and CBS have given audiences some more options, their inability to acquire a larger share of broadcast deals has made any comparison or competition with ESPN an unfair one. At present, Fox Sports 1 is the only sports network with the broadcast portfolio and marketing success that make it a viable competitor to ESPN, especially when comparing how those broadcast contracts impact editorial decisions.

This study will attempt to begin bridging that gap in Agenda Setting literature with a focus on ESPN. The creation of Fox Sports 1 – as well as several other new sports networks – allows for researchers to begin to take a more critical look at editorial decisions made by ESPN's news division and investigate how it compares to existing broadcast relationships that the network has with various professional sports leagues and collegiate conferences. With that in mind, this study will attempt to answer two questions: first, do national sports television networks (specifically ESPN and Fox Sports 1) cover certain professional leagues and/or collegiate conferences – leagues that ESPN and/or Fox Sports 1 hold broadcast

contracts with – more frequently? And secondly, is there a regional bias by these aforementioned networks in that they cover local teams more heavily than teams outside the region?

The researcher believed that the study would yield positive responses to both questions, hypothesizing that both ESPN and Fox Sports 1 would have significantly more coverage of sports with which the networks had broadcast contracts than those without contracts. Also, the research hypothesized that both networks would cover local teams more frequently than non-regional teams.

### Chapter 3: Method

One method that lends itself to quantitative analyses such as this study is content analysis, which has been used throughout the past few decades as a means to examine news outlets and their content (Mitchel, 2013). This is a popular form of research in the media-effects field, and one that has seen a sharp increase in publication in academic journals. Riffe and Freitag (1997) found that in the 24 years between 1971 and 1995, there was a statistically significant rise in the number of studies in *Journalism & Mass Communication* featuring content analyses.

This study focused primarily on who said what and what they said; the focus was not on who was receiving the message or what the message's effects were.

In order to analyze the content found on ESPN and Fox Sports 1's televised news broadcasts, this study conducted a comparison of the two networks, looking for the possibility of Agenda Setting in the types of stories that each network aired as well as trends in the focus of that content. Specifically, this analysis looked to determine what sports, stories, or events were seen as most important by each network on a given day and over a predetermined length of time.

This study attempted to answer two questions. First, what sports, stories, or events are seen as most important by each network on a given day and over a predetermined length of time? Second, do ESPN and Fox Sports 1 have a regional bias towards local sports teams? (See Appendix B for visual representation of these research questions).

## **Background of content analysis**

Studies by Choi (2002) and Cladio and Pedersen (2007) in the past decade raised several questions about ESPN's impact on the sports media landscape and its broadcast tendencies. Eagleman (2008) and Kischefsky (2011) followed with quantitative studies, investigating how ESPN's news coverage may support the theoretical tenets of Agenda Setting in an effort to impact not only the perceived salience of individual stories, but also specific professional leagues and/or collegiate athletic conferences. Those latter two studies drive the two aforementioned research questions. Through a content analysis, this study similarly investigated the content central to those studies by Kischefsky (2011) and Eagleman (2008) while also providing further context by having comparable data from a competitive network that wasn't available at the time of those previous studies.

The author anticipated that this study would result in two conclusions to the aforementioned research questions: (1) Existence of broadcast rights lead to more coverage, both in the number of stories as well as the length of those stories, resulting in select sports and leagues becoming more salient due to a financial relationship between that league or conference and the broadcast network; and (2) national sports television networks, specifically ESPN and FS1, have regional bias with regard to the teams they cover most regularly and with the greatest amount of time. This will manifest itself in a greater number of stories covering these teams, as well as the stories having greater length than those covering non-regional teams.

## Methodological parameters

Building from prior research, this study was conducted using a content analysis of two daily sports news programs: one ESPN program and one Fox Sports 1 program. For ESPN, this study examined *SportsCenter*, and for Fox Sports 1, the researcher assessed *Fox Sports Daily*. *SportsCenter* is ESPN's primary news program, and the same can be said for *Fox Sports Daily* and Fox Sports 1. Both networks air new episodes of their respective shows each morning with additional new episodes in the evening covering that night's action in sports. Those episodes also include any stories that may have broken between the final morning episode and the 11:00 p.m. timeslot.

While *Fox Sports Daily* is still a relatively new show, it is a comparable program to *SportsCenter*, which is widely regarded as the "most comprehensive national sports news television program available in the United States" (Kischefsky, 2011). *Fox Sports Daily* presents news in a similar fashion to *SportsCenter* and is formatted in a similar way. Historically, *SportsCenter* has been used as the ESPN program for studies examining the network's broadcast trends and possible Agenda Setting through content production. Such studies include those published by Farred (2000), Clavio and Pedersen (2007), and Kischefsky (2011).

These two shows were selected because each is a one-hour news program that aired daily at 9:00 a.m., Eastern Standard Time. Using these two shows allows for as close of a comparison as possible. Each show is regarded as the flagship program of its respective network, placed prominently in timeslots and programming schedules to attract the largest possible audience.

For any content analysis, variables must be operationally defined for what is being researched. The next step was determining (1) what publication or television network would be observed, (2) how long would it be observed, and (3) during what time would it be observed (Mitchel, 2013). The researcher operationalized each professional and college team in selected leagues; the networks observed were ESPN's *SportsCenter* and Fox Sports 1's *Fox Sports Live*. A constructed week of eight days over a three-week span during October and November 2013 was selected for the time frame.

For the first question, six sports were used to examine how news coverage compares to the existence of broadcast rights. Those six sports were NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision, NCAA Division 1 basketball, NFL, National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL), and Major League Soccer (MLS). These leagues were compared with the leagues and college conferences with which ESPN and Fox Sports 1 have existing broadcast rights agreements. Those leagues and conferences are listed below in Figure 1.

<i>Leagues with Network Broadcast Contracts</i>			
ESPN		Fox Sports 1	
League	Abbr.	League	Abbr.
National Football League	NFL	National Football League	NFL
National Basketball Association	NBA	National Basketball Association*	NBA
Pacific 12 Conference	Pac-12	Pacific 12 Conference	Pac-12
Atlantic Coast Conference	ACC	Conference USA	
Big Ten Conference	B1G	American Conference	
Major League Soccer	MLS	Big 12 Conference	
Southeastern Conference	SEC	Ultimate Fighting Championship	UFC
Sun Belt Conference		National Hockey League	NHL
		UEFA Champions League	UCL
<i>*Includes regional team coverage</i>			

Figure 1. Leagues with ESPN and/or Fox Sports 1 broadcast contracts.

Important to note about NCAA sports-broadcasting rights is that unlike professional sports, which negotiate broadcast agreements for the entire league, the NCAA allows individual conferences to sign their own deals. That is why there are numerous conferences for each network listed, as opposed to simply all of college football or basketball.

Observation days were altered for each of the three weeks used throughout data collection. The first week was Monday-Wednesday-Friday; the second was Tuesday-Thursday; the third was Monday-Wednesday-Friday. This selection of days spread across three weeks, as opposed to one continuous week, controlled for potential skewing of results that could arise from a single, large news item that could dominate the news cycle for an entire week.

In 2013, there were a number of stories that would be examples of such news-cycle-dominating narratives: championship results in any major sports, legal situations such as Aaron Hernandez' arrest on murder charges, scandals such as Notre Dame football player Manti Te'o's fake girlfriend, Lance Armstrong's admission of steroid use, and the Boston Marathon bombing (Los Angeles Times, 2013).

While this provided an incomplete picture of the totality of editorial decisions on both *SportsCenter* and *Fox Sports 1*, creating a reasonable sample size is common practice in content analyses as a means to have a manageable amount of data. "In the study of communications, as in the study of people, you often can't observe directly all you would like to explore. Usually, it's appropriate to sample" (Mitchell, 2013, p. 332). The selected three-week period from November 25 to December 13 does not provide a complete analysis of ESPN or Fox Sports 1's editorial decisions for the entire year. However, the data collected provides a sample of those decisions during a time period that included the widest range of sports that were currently in-season.

This content analysis also answered the second research question as to whether or not teams within a network's geographic region received more coverage. The researcher examined what specific teams were covered in news segments on each network's flagship news program. This portion of the study was used to examine whether or not there is a regional bias by ESPN and/or FS1. Both of these networks focus on national issues and stories in American sports. However, questions about potential bias by ESPN exist and have been covered in popular media, as mentioned earlier in this study.

In order to determine whether regional bias was present, coders involved in the content analysis of each constructed week examined whether regional teams were covered

more frequently and with more airtime than those outside of the network's region. This study defined "regional area" for a television network as 200 miles. This distance of 200 miles was chosen as the "regional area" for a television network because it is the standard distance used for non-compete clauses within employment contracts for broadcast networks; therefore, it has a standing in the news industry.

ESPN is headquartered in Bristol, Conn., and Fox Sports 1's studios are in Westwood, CA, outside of Los Angeles. This contrast of location provided useful distinction between the two networks. For each network, there are a number of college and professional teams that fall within the 200-mile radius. ESPN has a combined 21 Division 1 collegiate and professional teams within its region while Fox Sports 1 has eleven such teams. A list of these teams for each network can be found in Figure 2.

<i>Teams Located Within Network Geographic Regions</i>			
<u>ESPN</u>		<u>Fox Sports 1</u>	
<i>Team</i>	<i>League</i>	<i>Team</i>	<i>League</i>
Boston College	NCAA	Los Angeles Kings	NHL
New England Patriots	NFL	Los Angeles Lakers	NBA
Boston Celtics	NBA	Los Angeles Clippers	NBA
Boston Bruins	NHL	University of California, L.A.	NCAA
New York Knicks	NBA	University of Southern California	NCAA
Brooklyn Nets	NBA	Stanford University	NCAA
New York Jets	NFL	Los Angeles Galaxy	MLS
New York Giants	NFL	Chivas USA	MLS
New York Islanders	NHL	Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim	MLB
New York Rangers	NHL	Los Angeles Dodgers	MLB
St. John's University	NCAA	Los Angeles Kings	NHL
Seton Hall University	NCAA		
Syracuse University	NCAA		
New York Red Bulls	MLS		
St. Joseph's University	NCAA		
Temple University	NCAA		
Villanova University	NCAA		
Pennsylvania University	NCAA		
Philadelphia Flyers	NHL		
Philadelphia 76ers	NBA		
Philadelphia Eagles	NFL		

Figure 2. Teams located in ESPN and Fox Sports 1's geographic region.

### **Reliability**

A pilot study was conducted with two coders prior to final data collection to gauge intercoder reliability and identify any issues with the coding instructions or data-collection process. The pilot study examined three days of episodes from both *SportsCenter* and *Fox Sports Live*. Using Cohen's Kappa, the pilot study observed a statistically significant level of

reliability between the two coders on all three of the observed variables from the three episodes.

Cohen's Kappa is measured on a scale between zero and one with higher values representing a higher level of agreement between coders. Kappa values can be broken down into five ranges: slight agreement (0.01-0.20), fair agreement (0.21-0.40), moderate agreement (0.41-0.60), substantial agreement (0.61-0.80), and almost perfect agreement (0.81-0.99) among observers (Viera & Garrett, 2005). All three variables measured in the pilot study (story type, sport covered, and whether regional teams were involved or not) resulted in Kappa values that represented either substantial or perfect agreement. Story type agreement had a .633 Kappa, while the final two variables (sport covered and whether or not regional teams were covered or not) both had a 1.000 Kappa, which represents perfect agreement between coders.

While the intercoder reliability for story type — .633 Kappa — falls within the “substantial agreement” range, it was near the low end of that range, and helped uncover an issue with the coding process. This problem involved stories that may include multiple visual elements within a single story, while the coding sheet calls for only one visual story type to be labeled for any one story.

Coders were arbitrarily assigning one of a possible two story types. This issue was resolved and instructions amended: In the event that a single story involved multiple visual elements, the coders were to indicate the “story type” label that was used most prevalently throughout the story. This change in coding instruction improved intercoder reliability for that variable during the data collection of the final study.

For this content analysis, two coders independently utilized a pretested coding template to evaluate a number of characteristics of individual news stories for each network's show for each of the eight days observed. See Appendix A for the complete coding template. Within any content analysis, data must be codified within a conceptual framework as a means to compare the collected data (Mitchel, 2013). In this case, each story was codified at three different levels: first, whether the segment appeared on the ESPN network or Fox Sports 1; second, whether that segment covered a sport with pre-existing broadcast agreements through ESPN or Fox Sports 1; and finally, what teams were covered in the segment and whether those teams are located within the 200-mile predetermined geographical radius of either network.

Each analysis allowed the coder to identify individual news stories by length, topic, visual elements (such as a news reader with a graphic, live interview, or a pre-recorded video package), type of sport covered, and teams involved to answer both of this study's research questions. This method allowed this study to quantify individual news stories and assign comparable values to those stories in order to determine the implied salience of an individual piece of news.

The ability to replicate any study is dependent on the ability of future researchers to reproduce the data collection and analysis to gather similar results as previous studies. In other words, the study must be able to be recreated with similar findings in order to be perceived as having high reliability. "Though the results may vary from one study to another, the more steps of a study can be duplicated the more reliable it is" (Kischefsky, 2011, p. 28). This particular study should be reliable because coding the individual stories from both ESPN and Fox Sports 1 can be replicated using the coding template from this

study. The coding template (see Appendix A) used in this study allows for a researcher to compile data and observe statistical differences in data sets without needing to engage human subjects or acquire qualitative data such as surveys or focus groups, removing a level of variability that could negatively impact the results' reliability factor for this study.

Cohen's Kappa was used to gauge intercoder reliability. "Intercoder reliability is the widely used term for the extent to which independent coders evaluate a characteristic of a message or artifact and reach the same conclusion" (Lombardi et al., 2002). This is a means by which researchers can evaluate how consistent their data collection and/or analysis is between the study's coders. The Cohen's Kappa equation accounts for the possibility of chance agreement between coders by considering "the number of categories as well as the distribution of values across them" (Lombard, et al., 2002, p. 591).

A study's validity is determined by how truthful or honest a study's results are (Neumann, 2006). Some examples of validity factors include length of time, what time of year the data was taken, and how the data may be clustered. For example, in this study, data was clustered variably through the three weeks of collection, alternating between Monday-Wednesday-Friday and Tuesday-Thursday from week to week.

This study has a high level of validity because the scope or timespan of the study is over three weeks long. The days used in each of the three weeks have at least one day in between where data is not collected. This was done to ensure that a larger, or more prevalent, single story does not skew data for several days of coverage on one or both of the networks. Also, the time of year used (October/November) includes a range of sports being in-season including football, basketball, soccer, hockey, etc. This time frame allows for a greater number and variety of sports to receive coverage from one or both networks

as opposed to other times of year, such as the summer, which would have a smaller selection of in-season professional and collegiate sports.

This study utilized a quantitative analysis of what sports leagues and teams ESPN and Fox Sports 1 covered on a day-to-day basis on each network's daily morning sports news programs as well as the amount of time that was spent on those individual stories.

A quantitative design provides a statistical analysis of the data, while a qualitative design requires more interpretive analysis of the results. The former allows for an objective examination of what the numbers produced in the results of the study say, while the latter provides for a subjective interpretation (Kischefsky, 2011, p. 27).

## Chapter 4: Findings

Following the three-episode pilot study, the complete research was conducted, using eight episodes from both *SportsCenter* and *Fox Sports Live*. Using Cohen's Kappa to evaluate intercoder reliability for the data collected, the two coders had a .764 Kappa value for story type, representing substantial agreement between the two coders; there was a perfect agreement between both coders on what sports were covered (1.000 Kappa); the coders had a .854 kappa value for whether or not regional teams are covered, which represents a nearly perfect agreement. The rest of this chapter details the data that was collected during the study.

### Frequency of coverage

This study's first research question asked whether or not ESPN and Fox Sports 1 covered certain professional and collegiate leagues more frequently than others (specifically leagues with broadcast agreements). The researcher's hypothesis was that, in fact, both networks would cover contracted leagues significantly more than those without broadcast deals.

*Hypothesis 1: ESPN and Fox Sports 1 cover contracted leagues and conferences significantly more than those without broadcast agreements.*

To test Hypothesis 1, a chi-square was conducted – see Table 1 below:

Table 1

*Coverage by Network, contract vs. no contract*

Type	ESPN	Fox Sports 1
<b>Contracted sport</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>146</b>
<i>(Percentage)</i>	<i>92.9</i>	<i>92.4</i>
<b>Non-contracted sport</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>
<i>(Percentage)</i>	<i>7.1</i>	<i>7.6</i>
<b>Total</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>158</b>
		P = 0.02
		Sigma = 0.04

*Table 1 suggests that both ESPN and Fox Sports 1 cover contracted leagues significantly more than “other” leagues and conferences – supporting Hypothesis 1.*

This study discovered the difference in the “Other” sports that each networked covered during the observed timeframe was statistically significant ( $p=0.02$ ). While ESPN only had 10 stories involving “other” sports, Fox Sports 1 had 32 such stories. To test for the significance of these statistical differences, a chi-square test was run. This study found that there was a Pearson chi-square sigma value of 0.04, indicating a significant difference between the coverage of each network. This result means the null hypothesis may be rejected, with the study having used a confidence interval of 95 percent. This mean’s the study’s original hypothesis is supported: contracted leagues receive more coverage from each network than leagues without broadcast agreements.

The findings from the study support the hypothesis that there is a statistical significance between the coverage of leagues *with* broadcast contracts and those *without* such contracts. Furthermore, when including leagues that *just* Fox Sports 1 has a broadcast

relationship with, there was no statistically significant difference in the coverage *between* the two networks, with a nearly identical coverage rate.

### **Coverage of regional teams**

The second focus of this research was on the coverage that teams within a network's geographic region receive compared to others. Table 2 displays the findings for both ESPN and Fox Sports 1 with regard to whether stories involved regional teams or not, separated by league. The study asked whether either or both network covered local teams more frequently than non-local teams. The researcher's hypothesis was that both networks would have significantly more coverage for regional teams of each network.

*Hypothesis 2: ESPN and Fox Sports 1 provide more coverage of professional and college teams which are within their geographic region than those outside that region.*

To test Hypothesis 2, a chi-square was conducted – see Table 2 below:

Table 2

*Number of Stories Involving Regional and Non-Regional Teams, By Network (October-November, 2013)*

<u>League</u>	<u>ESPN</u>		<u>Fox Sports 1</u>	
	Regional Team Identified	No Regional Team Identified	Regional Team Identified	No Regional Team Identified
NFL	19	48	0	45
NBA	11	30	13	35
College Football	2	14	0	20
College Basketball	1	6	0	13
Other	3	7	4	28
<i>Total</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>105</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>141</i>
Total # of Stories		141		158
Percentage	25.53%	74.47%	10.76%	89.24%
				P = 0.02 Sigma = 0.04

*Table 2 suggests that neither ESPN nor Fox Sports 1 significantly covered regional teams or schools more than teams or schools outside of their geographic region – therefore, Hypothesis 2 was rejected.*

The above table shows that ESPN’s coverage during the study covered teams within its geographic region over twice as often as Fox Sports 1 (25.53 percent to 10.76 percent). This data does not conclusively prove that both (or neither) networks engage in regional bias in all their coverage; however, it does provide a baseline of data that shows that however large or small of a regional bias might exist is consistent between both networks.

However, this study found that while no bias can be demonstrated in regional teams’ coverage, there is a statistical significance to the difference between ESPN’s

coverage of “regional” teams as compared to similar stories by Fox Sports 1 (p-value 0.02). This study, using a chi-square analysis in SPSS, found a chi-square sigma value of .004, using a confidence interval of 95 percent, meaning that the null hypothesis can be rejected for ESPN; this means the study’s hypothesis can be accepted: local or “regional” teams are covered more frequently.

On the surface, the data would appear to suggest that ESPN skews coverage to schools and professional teams within its northeast geographic region more than its counterpart, Fox Sports 1. However, over half (19) of ESPN’s stories including regional teams were those covering the NFL. Those stories included the New England Patriots, Philadelphia Eagles, New York Jets, and the York Giants. The problem with this comparison is that Fox Sports 1 doesn’t have any NFL teams within its geographic region, even though a large portion of Fox Sports 1’s coverage includes NFL stories.

The results show that the hypothesis of more local coverage cannot be supported. Neither network featured local teams more than non-local teams. However, ESPN’s coverage of local teams *was* significantly more than similar coverage by Fox during the study.

### **Further research and data analysis**

The breakdown of stories appearing on ESPN’s *SportsCenter* and Fox Sports 1’s *Fox Sports Live* can be found in Table 1, which display the number of stories that featured sports with broadcast contracts with that network. The tables also display the breakdown of stories as well as what type of visual and/or audio elements were used for stories covering each sport. Stories were separated into six separate categories, ranging from a

video package with commentary to a simple reader that appeared on-screen to be read by the show’s anchor or host.

The table displays the raw totals for each sport and stories. The data shows that a high percentage of segments on both *SportsCenter* and *Fox Sports Live* are devoted to stories from sports that have a broadcast contract with the corresponding network, most specifically the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), college football, and college basketball. Stories included in the “other” category included professional soccer leagues, the National Hockey League (NHL), ultimate fighting, and pre-Olympic coverage, among other things.

Table 3

*Sports Stories, By League and Type (October-November, 2013)*

ESPN and Fox Sports 1

Sport	Reader with Graphic		Live Interview		Video Package		Total	
	(ESPN)	(FS1)	(ESPN)	(FS1)	(ESPN)	(FS1)	(ESPN)	(FS1)
NFL	11	12	31	10	25	23	67	45
NBA	2	4	8	5	31	39	41	48
College Football	1	10	4	3	11	7	16	20
College Basketball	0	0	0	0	7	13	7	13
<u>Other</u>	2	8	1	4	7	20	10	32
<i>Total</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>81</i>	<i>102</i>	<i>141</i>	<i>158</i>

After examining the data collected during the three-week time period, several similarities between ESPN and Fox Sports 1’s coverage appeared. Both networks’ coverage

included a majority of stories covering the NFL and NBA. Fox Sports 1 produced 58.85 percent of its stories on those two leagues while ESPN’s coverage of the pair was even more pronounced, accounting for 76.6 percent of *SportsCenter* stories examined. The two programs produced a nearly identical percentage of stories focused on the NBA; Fox Sports 1 had 30.37 percent of its stories focused on the league with ESPN’s percentage just slightly lower at 29.08 percent.

When the data is expanded to include college football and college basketball – of which both ESPN and Fox Sports 1 have broadcast rights – the trends continue similarly. Those “big four” represent 79.74 percent of Fox Sports 1’s stories; meanwhile, an overwhelming majority of 92.91 percent of ESPN’s stories focused on those four leagues in the duration analyzed.

Table 4		
<i>Sports Stories, By Percentage of Total</i>		
<u>League</u>	<u>ESPN</u>	<u>Fox Sports 1</u>
NFL	47.52	28.48
NBA	29.08	30.37
College Football	11.35	12.66
College Basketball	4.96	8.23
Other	7.09	20.25
<i>Total percent*</i>	100	99.99

\* Column may not sum to 100% due to rounding

One significant difference between ESPN and Fox Sports 1’s coverage was in stories that featured sports and leagues that were categorized as “Other” for this study – the “other” label applied to any professional league or college conference that did not have a

broadcast contract with both ESPN and Fox Sports 1. As Table 4 shows, breaking down each network by percentage of stories covering each sport type, ESPN's *SportsCenter* featured only 10 such stories out of the total 141 recorded during the study, representing only 7.09 percent; meanwhile, Fox Sports 1 had nearly triple that percentage on *Fox Sports Live*, with 20.25 percent (32 total stories) of its content being devoted to "Other" sports.

Of those 32 stories that Fox Sports 1 ran, over half (20) covered four leagues — the National Hockey League, the Ultimate Fighting Championship, NASCAR Sprint Cup Series, and UEFA Champions League — which have existing broadcast agreements with Fox. Over the same time span, ESPN had zero stories covering those four sports. With the exception of NASCAR, none of those leagues have existing contracts with ESPN, and in the case of NASCAR, that contract expired at the end of the 2014 season, at which time Fox will become one of two networks to have a broadcast rights agreement with the organization.

### **Sport coverage and story duration**

The final variable evaluated in this study of ESPN and Fox Sports 1 was the length of time for stories from each network. Table 5 displays the average times for ESPN and Fox Sports 1, respectively, broken down by sport. The tables include the total number of stories for each sport and the raw average time of stories involving those individual sports. They also include the length for both the longest and shortest stories for each sport. The final column has a "filtered average," which is discussed later in this chapter.

Table 5

ESPN and Fox Sports 1 Stories, By Time (Seconds) (October-November, 2013)

Sport		N	Avg. Time	Maximum	Minimum	Filtered Avg.
NFL	(ESPN)	67	136.88	433	19	134.14
	(FS1)	45	106.27	316	17	118.3
NBA	(ESPN)	41	121.98	467	17	115.82
	(FS1)	48	96.98	288	15	94.61
CFB	(ESPN)	16	109.65	257	21	113.29
	(FS1)	20	89.8	223	13	86.67
CBB	(ESPN)	7	104	358	25	48.2
	(FS1)	13	50.23	86	37	48.18
Other	(ESPN)	10	115.3	260	23	108.75
	(FS1)	32	86.78	403	13	78.7

One initial observation from this data is that the total average length of all stories on ESPN's *SportsCenter* was nearly 30 seconds longer than the total average length of all stories on Fox Sports 1's *Fox Sports Live* for the sample from all stories. For the data collection, *SportsCenter* ran 141 stories that averaged 126.33 seconds while *Fox Sports 1's* 159 stories averaged only 96.84 seconds in length. The data showed that this was a significant difference, with an observed p-value of 0.002 and a Levene's test sigma of 0.01. The latter figure is used to test whether variance across multiple data sets is equal; the sigma value of 0.01 confirms this assumption to be correct.

However, both networks' coverage of the NFL was longer than any of the other four categories as well as the network averages. NFL coverage on ESPN averaged 136.88 seconds — over two minutes — while no other sport was within 14 seconds of that average. Furthermore, the combined average of all other stories fell short at 116.78. While a difference was observed by this study, the difference in time for these stories was found

not to be statistically significant. The p-value for the difference between NFL stories and all others was .195, meaning the observed differences were significant only at an 80 percent confidence interval, well below the 95 percent threshold.

Fox Sports 1 also had a discrepancy in story lengths as its average NFL story lasted 120.44 seconds with the NBA's 96.98-seconds average coming the closest. The observed difference in length of NFL stories and all others on Fox Sports 1 (120.33 seconds to 87.44 seconds) was found to be statistically significant by this study, with a p-value of 0.008, well within the 0.05 threshold for a 95 percent confidence interval.

Even with the statistically significant difference on Fox Sports 1, this observation may not truly represent the difference in coverage due to outliers. Several stories on both networks, which ran disproportionately long or short, may have slightly skewed those averages, leading to a misrepresentation of just how much of a difference truly existed in coverage during the observed period. Also, the fact that the study occurred throughout football season may have contributed to increased coverage of that particular sport at the time; however, professional and college basketball as well as college football were also in-season at this time.

In order to control for this potentially skewed data, the single longest and shortest stories in time for each league (NFL, NBA, college football, college basketball, and other) were eliminated from the data. Then, a new mean — or “filtered average” — was run. Also known as a “filtered mean,” this process is used in statistics as a means to eliminate outliers from a data set that may skew outputs such as a mean (Stigler, 1973). In this case, it allowed for single stories that were unusually long or short, which may have

disproportionately impacted whether these means had statistically significant differences between networks.

This adjustment in the mean caused most sports for both networks to have a lower average; but, in two cases — college basketball on *SportsCenter* and NFL on *Fox Sports Live* — the average time increased. Aside from those two exceptions, the filtered means created a greater discrepancy between coverage of the NFL and all other sports. The gap between ESPN's coverage of the NFL and any other sport widened from 14.9 seconds to 18.3 seconds. There was an even larger separation after the adjusted mean on Fox Sports 1: as NFL coverage increased by an average of 12.0 seconds, it widened the gap between the NFL and the NBA from 9.3 seconds to 23.7 seconds.

Another notable effect that the filtered average had was on ESPN's coverage of college basketball. The filtered mean (48.2 seconds) was almost a minute shorter than its raw average (104.0 seconds); this was likely due to the fact that the observed data included only seven college basketball stories; that few number of stories meant that the average time was most likely impacted by a single observed story that lasted nearly six minutes long (358 seconds).

One consistency between the networks is that their coverage of “other” sports did *not* have the shortest average stories; both networks' coverage of those “other” sports was longer than that of college basketball, and nearly as long as college football stories. However, it's important to note that only on Fox Sports 1's coverage was this difference observed to be statistically significant (p-value: 0.019).

Even though the raw averages show comparable coverage between college basketball and “other” sports, that comparison may not be an accurate depiction of the

data. Using the filtered mean, ESPN's coverage of "other" sports more than doubled college basketball stories (108.8 seconds to 48.2 seconds); the difference in coverage of both sports by Fox Sports 1 wasn't as much as ESPN, but "other" sports stories (78.7 seconds per story) averaged significantly longer time than college basketball stories (48.2 seconds). This observed difference had a p-value of 0.009.

While this study's research questions did not specifically attempt to address the variable of time for stories of individual sports, it is important to note that the results show that certain sports were covered longer than others, and in one case (the NFL on Fox Sports 1), there was a statistically significant (p-value: 0.008) difference between that league's coverage and the rest of the observed stories.

## Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions

This study attempted to quantify how Agenda Setting Theory can be related to the programming decisions of two national sports television networks: ESPN and Fox Sports 1. Agenda Setting Theory argues that the importance that a medium puts on a topic or news story impacts how audience members view that topic or story – simply put, the more important a story is presented, the more important it will be perceived by the audience. In order to do this, the study addressed several variables between the two networks, most notably what sports and/or leagues were receiving the most coverage by each network, which teams were being covered in these stories, what kind of stories were being produced for each league/conference, and the duration of these stories.

The two research questions within this study attempted to pinpoint two areas where each network may have a vested interest: (1) leagues and conferences with which the network has an existing contract and (2) teams within the networks' geographic region. The rationale for these research questions falls in the seemingly conflicted interest within the network between the broadcast rights deals and the purported journalistic objectivity of the news programming. This study attempted to find any impact that the former may have on the latter within two separate networks.

This study examined a three-week period of news coverage by ESPN and Fox Sports 1, and data revealed several conclusions regarding the aforementioned hypotheses. Specifically, this study was able to support one of the study's hypotheses while rejecting the other related to the sports and teams covered by the two networks. First, the research observed that Fox Sports 1's coverage of "other" sports – not the NFL, NBA, college basketball or college football – was significantly higher than that of ESPN, rejecting the null

hypothesis that there was no difference in coverage of these types of leagues. However, those leagues *did* have broadcast contracts with Fox Sports 1, unlike ESPN.

But one difference between the two networks is that Fox Sports 1 *did* have broadcast contracts with some of those “other” leagues – specifically Ultimate Fighting Championship, National Hockey League, NASCAR, and UEFA Champions League – but even when factoring in coverage of those four sports, there was no statistical difference in the frequency of coverage by the two networks for leagues with contracts versus those without.

Secondly, the study found that there was a statistically significant difference in the number of “regional” teams that ESPN and Fox Sports 1 covered in its news stories during the observational period (p-value: 0.02). These and other findings of this study provide an updated data set for a field of research that had previously been restricted by a dearth of sports networks to compare to ESPN. Previous research on televised sports news had focused on the coverage and reporting of ESPN alone, with no comparative data to use. Work had been done on print and online content using print and digital competitors to ESPN’s platforms; however, television content had not previously had a comparable measure.

This study should serve as an early evaluation of how ESPN compares with what is intended to be a competitive network in Fox Sports 1.

### **Coverage of “Regional” Teams**

In chapter four, the study’s results found that Hypothesis 2 was not supported – neither network covered “regional” teams more frequently than teams or schools outside its geographic region. However, the results did show the observed difference between

ESPN and Fox Sports 1's coverage of teams within their "regional" geographic region to be statistically significant (p-value: 0.02). The study found that ESPN covered their "regional" teams significantly more often than Fox Sports 1. But as is previously noted, this could be due to NFL coverage; both networks cover the NFL extensively; however, FS1 does not have a "regional" team while ESPN has four such teams.

In order to provide a more balanced comparison of the two networks and how they each cover local or "regional" teams, stories only covering the NBA can be used, as both ESPN and Fox Sports 1 have teams within their region. ESPN and Fox Sports 1 covered the NBA with a similar number of stories during the study (41 to 48), and once the NFL was removed, NBA stories represented a plurality of coverage for both networks during the study.

The result is a nearly identical split between regional and non-regional coverage. Eleven of ESPN's 41 NBA stories featured regional teams while 13 of Fox Sports 1's 48 NBA stories included regional teams. Represented as a percentage of league coverage, the similarity increases as ESPN's stories featuring regional teams made up 26.83 percent of its coverage of the NBA, while Fox Sports 1's was slightly higher at 27.08 percent, representing only a 0.25 percent difference between the two networks. Both networks' coverage of the NBA included over a quarter of their stories focused on, or included, regional teams. However, the teams that fall within each network's geographic region make up a significantly smaller percentage of teams within the league. ESPN's geographic region includes four NBA teams, only 13.33 percent of the league, while Fox Sports 1's area includes even fewer with two teams, or 6.67 percent of the league's teams.

## **Broadcast Contracts and Sport Popularity**

While there exists a significant difference between the stories covering sports that ESPN and Fox Sports have broadcast rights with and those that don't — most specifically the NFL, NBA, college football, and college basketball — there are a number of potentially mitigating explanations for that beyond a network's agenda-setting efforts. This coverage could be explained by the sport's overall popularity by the viewing public, regardless of which network broadcasts its competitions. For example, according to a recent Harris Poll, three of the five most popular American sports are the National Football League, college football, and the NBA, all of which have broadcast rights agreements with ESPN and Fox (Rovell, 2014).

The survey, which included over 2,000 respondents, had the NFL as the most popular sport at 35 percent with major league baseball (14 percent), college football (11 percent), auto racing (seven percent), the National Basketball Association (six percent), the National Hockey League (five percent), and college basketball (three percent) rounding out the top seven sports. Three percent of respondents answered "not sure" while other sports had fewer than three percent combined for the final 15 percent (Rovell, 2014).

As Rovell's article notes, auto racing and the NHL both rank among the top five most popular sports among a sampling of American sports fans earlier this year. Those statistics could indicate that Fox Sports 1 is working to fill a niche that is largely ignored by ESPN's day-to-day coverage. Beyond that, another explanation for the additional NHL, UFC, NASCAR, and Champions League coverage could be attempts by a new network to increase exposure for the live event programming it provides. While this data may support the

argument that broadcast agreements can, and do, impact editorial decisions, this may also be the result of a fledgling network coming into its own in its first year on the air rather than a display of editorial priorities.

Future broadcast agreements by both networks could provide studies in the coming years to identify if that evidence is consistent with greater editorial trends or symptomatic of the relatively limited sample size used in this study.

### **Limitations and Further Study**

While these findings had a high reliability factor and validity in the data, there are a number of limitations to this particular study. The month-long timespan provided enough data for statistically significant findings – both comparing stories within each network as well as the differences in coverage from one network to the other – but does not necessarily reflect the programming and news decisions throughout the calendar year by either ESPN or Fox Sports 1. This data provides a comprehensive look at the stories being produced by both networks during this specific three-week period in November and December; however, it cannot be extrapolated beyond that time period.

A similar three-week timespan during March and April or June and July could have likely produced varying data, with different sports in season during those two time periods than the one used throughout this study.

Further inherent limitations to this study include the newness of Fox Sports 1 as a sports network. The most pertinent issue in this study is an analysis of which leagues and/or conferences have broadcast agreements with either or both of these networks and whether such leagues receive more news coverage. Because Fox Sports 1 has existed for

less than a year, it is at a decided disadvantage to ESPN in the number of broadcast agreements it has with various leagues and conferences. In the coming years and decades, a more nuanced understanding may be reached by simply allowing Fox Sports 1 time to acquire those broadcast rights. A more experienced, unique broadcast lineup for the Fox Sports 1 network in the coming years would potentially allow for studies to examine and compare networks with more competing interests than the current atmosphere, which has both networks sharing partial broadcast agreements with an number of leagues.

Currently, Fox Sports 1 does have several broadcast agreements that differentiate it from ESPN, including the Ultimate Fighting Championship, the National Hockey League, and some international soccer matches. The study showed anecdotal evidence that these leagues received more coverage on Fox Sports 1 than ESPN.

Another problem with this observation is that several of the “Other” sports that Fox Sports 1 covered during this time — Ultimate Fighting Championship, NASCAR, the Winter Olympics, tennis, and the UEFA Champions League — are leagues that either have no teams within Fox Sports 1’s geographic region, or are individual sports.

Another consideration for the coverage of “other” sports for both networks, both in number of stories and the length of such stories is the presence of unique events that receive more coverage than they would have otherwise and did not involve the NFL, NBA, college football, or college basketball. As mentioned in the method chapter of this study, such events have the potential to dominate a news cycle and skew the data. While there were no such events comparable such as a championship game or scandal involving athletes, there were two topics of coverage that were unique to this time period: the death of Nelson Mandela and preview coverage of the winter Olympics.

Both networks ran several lengthy segments on Mandela and his impact on the sporting world; meanwhile, Fox Sports 1 had two stories previewing the Olympics that would take place in the coming months. Future research could investigate the impact the way these unique, singular stories involving issues of popular culture or stand-alone events impact the overall presentation of news on both networks and how to statistically control for such events when comparing the networks.

This study does provide a baseline model of comparison between sports news networks and the content that is produced on their daily television programs. It also is a starting point for further research that could provide more information or deeper context to the findings of this study. A comprehensive year-round study of these networks would potentially allow for a more statistically significant data collection. In several cases, there was a noticeable difference in the length of stories from one sport to another or from one network's coverage of a sport to the other; however, the relative low number of data points in the study likely contributed to these differences not being statistically significant (falling within the 95 percent confidence interval). This problem could be eliminated by a longer, more comprehensive study.

This study does provide a relevant sample size but does not account for the entire population of news coverage from either network. Furthermore, this study was restricted to a quantitative analysis of the data and a comparison of stories covering leagues and conferences *with* network broadcast agreements and those *without*; however, the subject of this study lends itself to future analyses, including qualitative analyses that investigate the impact of perceived salience and/or the popularity of individual sports and teams.

Another variable in this study that, if changed, could provide different results is the individual show that is being used for each network. This study used the 9:00 a.m. edition for each show; however, the nightly broadcast could have possibly provided for different stories to have different visual elements or different time allotments. For example, the evening edition of *SportsCenter* or *Fox Sports Daily* may treat a story differently if it had broken earlier that afternoon than the morning edition the following day, after nearly 12 hours of time has elapsed.

Further studies may also benefit from a more detailed, qualitative analysis of individual stories from both networks. This study analyzed only what teams and/or leagues were being covered and what types of visual elements were used. A qualitative look at the context of stories could provide for more information on how these networks package news: Is a team or player being discussed more favorably than another? That and other questions may be answered through future studies.

Also, another qualitative approach could move beyond what is simply reported to what impact it has on the viewer. Much of Agenda Setting theory is grounded in the impact that media can have — or attempts to have — on the viewers and their perceived salience of a given story. Using surveys and/or focus groups could allow researchers to gain an understanding as to whether Agenda Setting by the media has an substantive impact on the perceived salience of news stories or individual subjects that are featured more prominently, given more visual elements, and/or longer segments in news programming.

Further relevant qualitative elements from those in the media industry could also provide context to the editorial and production decisions that go into each broadcast and how they are, if at all, impacted by the broadcast side of the network. These qualitative

interviews could include gatekeepers at both ESPN and Fox Sports 1. However, those interviews may be inherently subjective due to the individual's relationship with the network. The advent of CBS and NBC's sports networks could help alleviate that issue of objectivity; including qualitative interviews with gatekeepers at these networks could allow researchers to understand the decision-making process for sports networks without the interviews being influenced by personal relationships with a network's product while providing a base of general knowledge to the processes involved in these daily sports programs.

## **Conclusions**

Just like any television news network in today's media climate, sports networks are financially dependent and reliant on advertising decisions that are made based on viewership and a network's ability to connect a company or product with customers — and the more customers the better, especially in key demographics.

But unlike other news networks, sports networks like ESPN and Fox Sports 1 must also compete, and bid, on broadcast rights deals with various leagues and sports. While the nightly news on CBS or NBC very rarely has anything to do with that network's lineup of comedy or drama series, *SportsCenter* and *Fox Sports 1* are news programs on the editorial side of a network that covers and analyzes the sports that consistently appear on the broadcast side of the same network. And even as executives from both networks assure the public that it doesn't, these intertwined relationships create an inherent conflict of interest between decisions made with journalistic integrity in mind and those driven by financially significant broadcast relationships.

Those competing interests are important considerations because of the influence that television networks can have — or can attempt to have — on their audiences. This study utilized Agenda Setting theory as a means to examine the content that ESPN and Fox Sports 1 deliver to their audiences through their news programming. Both networks have been marketed and promoted as unbiased in their journalistic practices, an important value for any news outlet. But previous studies by Kischefsky (2011), Clavio and Pederson (2007), and others have indicated that data shows ESPN may have a news agenda related to the broadcast agreements the network has for its live events.

This study found that a disproportionate amount of coverage for both ESPN and Fox Sports 1 was centered on sports and leagues with which each network has a pre-existing broadcast relationship. This data supports the conclusions reached by similar studies over the past decade, while this study provides additional context with data from Fox Sports 1, which was unavailable to previous researchers. However, it must be noted that there are potentially mitigating factors to explain the data, including popularity of those sports and the fact that a number of such sports were in-season during the time the study was conducted and data collected.

But if future studies continue to produce data that suggests a statistically significant difference between stories covering leagues *with* broadcast contracts and those *without*, both in frequency and length, questions will continue to be raised about these networks: how the broadcast side of these networks influences the journalistic entities to which they are related. At some point, ESPN's John Skipper and Fox Sports 1's Randy Freer, president of each respective network, will have to answer those questions.

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**APPENDIX A - Coding Template**

***General Information***

**Network (Circle One)**

ESPN

Fox Sports 1

**LENGTH: \_\_\_\_:\_\_\_\_ (Minutes:Seconds)**

**TYPE OF STORY (Choose one, the best answer)**

Reader

Reader with graphic

Live Interview

Video Package

**SPORT COVERED (Choose One)**

NFL

College Football

College Basketball

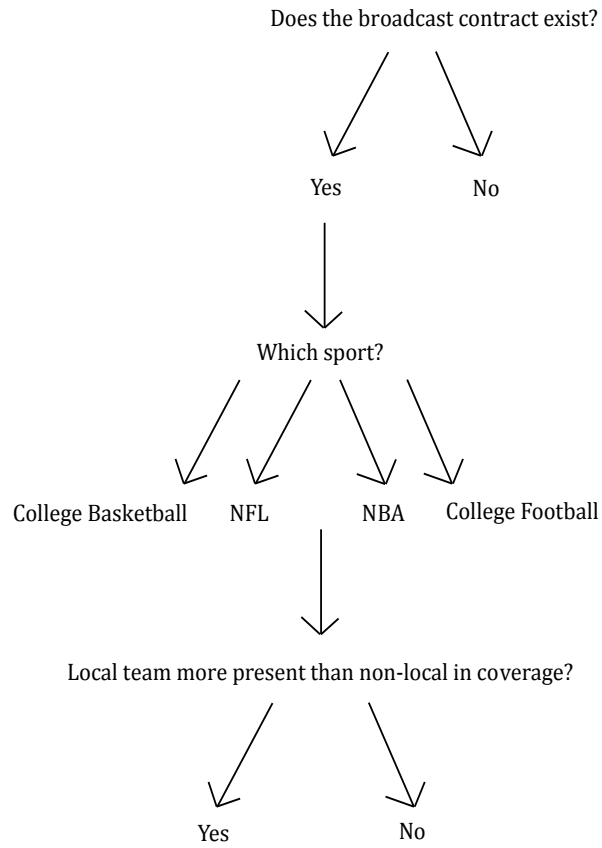
NBA

Other \_\_\_\_\_ (write-in)

**TEAMS INVOLVED (List as many as necessary)**

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

## APPENDIX B – Research question flow chart



SPORTS NEWS AND NETWORK RIGHTS:  
BALANCING A CONFLICT OF INTEREST  
A CONTENT ANALYSIS  
A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE  
MASTER OF ARTS  
BY  
BRANDAN M. ALFORD

Committee Approval:

_____	_____
Committee Chairperson	Date

_____	_____
Committee Member	Date

_____	_____
Committee Member	Date

Departmental Approval:

_____	_____
Departmental Chairperson	Date

_____	_____
Dean of Graduate School	Date

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY  
MUNCIE, INDIANA  
May 2016

## **ABSTRACT**

**THESIS:** Sports news and network rights: Balancing a conflict of interest

**STUDENT:** Brandan Alford

**DEGREE:** Master of Arts

**COLLEGE:** College of Communication Information and Media

**DATE:** May, 2016

**PAGES:** 68

This study has examined news programming by two sports news networks, ESPN and Fox Sports 1, evaluating four variables that examined what sports were covered, what visual elements were employed in individual stories, what teams or schools received coverage, and how long stories ran. The data collected found that sports with broadcast contracts with each network — more specifically, the National Football League, National Basketball Association, college football, and college basketball — received more coverage than other sports. The study also found that both networks cover teams and schools within their geographic region at a similar rate, while each network's coverage of the NFL outpaced any other sport in terms of average time per story.