

## **“Oh, See What We Say:” A Content Analysis of Partisan Media’s Framing of the “take a knee” silent protest by the NFL**

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### **Abstract**

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*A content analysis was conducted to examine how partisan media frame stories about the NFL and the silent protest during the national anthem. A total of 445 newspaper articles associated with the topic were retrieved from an extensive search of several databases. Results of the content analysis show that clear differences in the types of frames used in headlines and news stories by partisan media ( $X^2 = 42.6$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .0000$ ).*

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**Keywords:** Partisan media, Framing theory, NFL protest, tone and type of frame, football, athlete activism

When San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee to protest racial injustice, media coverage of social protests seemed to reach a crescendo. In this study, we analyze the way that partisan media covers social protests, focusing our attention on the subject of the NFL protests. Based on a content analysis of news articles from different print sources, we were able to evaluate the episodic or thematic framing of the article content and headline as well as whether the headline took a positive, negative or neutral tone towards the protesters. Thus, the purpose of this study is to analyze the way partisan outlets depict and frame social issues in order to determine the influence media bias has on perception and the cause of this influence. This analysis will not only identify the influence of media bias but will also aid in determining future steps to combat or avoid the effects of media bias.

We begin by reviewing relevant research on partisan media, framing and mass media. We then use a content analysis to explore how partisan media frame and report news regarding the kneeling protest during the national anthem by players in the national football league. We hope to test the proposition that the media bias may be present in controversial and emotive events like racial equality, patriotism, and politics.

Most research on media bias relies on local surveys or experiments and often tests hypotheses using convenience samples. That is not the case in the current study and its analysis. The research is significant in that it expands on and adds to the literature on media bias by analyzing how partisan media frame national news stories, particularly news stories involving racial conflict and protest. This study offers an explanation of partisan media and their framing of the NFL protest during the national anthem by integrating framing theory and a content analysis.

### **Research Question**

For the purposes of this study, the following questions were used to guide the research:

1. What are the narrative techniques that journalists in partisan media spectrum use to frame the news about the NFL protests? Specifically, to what extent do journalists rely on episodic or thematic frames in their coverage about the protests during the national anthem?
2. What influence does the liberal, conservative, or moderate bias of a news outlet have on the tone of headlines and news stories about the NFL protests?
3. Does the headline framing of stories about the NFL protests differ based on the source’s conservative, moderate or liberal bias?

As part of this study, the investigation included three research hypotheses:

1. Liberal media will frame stories of the NFL protests during the national anthem using more objective facts (thematic frames) while conservative media will rely on episodic frames when covering the NFL protests.
2. Headlines featuring mentions of the athletes of the NFL who kneel during the playing of the national anthems in United States newspapers will more frequently be positive in liberal media than mentions of the protest in conservative newspapers.
3. Episodic frames of headlines and news stories that mention protests during the national anthem will be more prominent in national conservative media than liberal media. And, thematic frames of headlines and news stories mentioning the NFL protests will be more prominent in national liberal media than conservative media.

**Literature Review**

**Partisan Media**

Much has changed in media over the last decade. Although cable news networks and talk radio have continued their partisan brand of news coverage, other media have emerged as major players as well. For example, MSNBC has emerged as a major media player, along with Mother Jones, The New Yorker, Politico, and others (see Figure 1). As of this writing, the media landscape as depicted in figure one includes visible examples of extreme liberal or left-leaning and extreme conservative or right-leaning media.

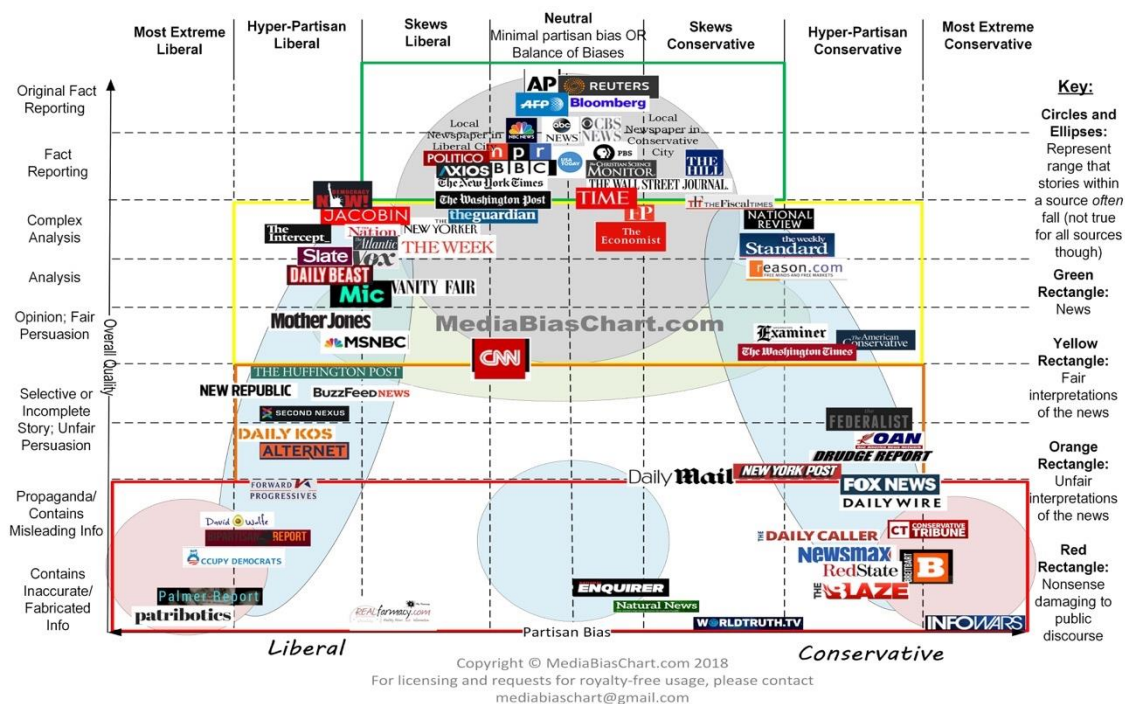


Figure 1. Media Bias Chart (2018).

As Figure 1 shows, it seems as if changes in media have also influenced highly circulated, traditional papers like The Wall Street Journal and Time magazine to likely be more perceived as learning more to the right in some of their news coverage. In fact, some research suggests that the “growth of the internet in the last 20 years has also played a significant role in the advancement of partisan media” (Heese & Baloria, 2017). According to Heese and Blaoria (2017), partisan internet outlets are now “commonplace” and are used to provide updates on news and as a main source of information by a large group of consumers. This literature led to the research question that guided the present work:

**RQ1: What are the framing techniques that journalists in partisan media use to report news about the NFL protests?****Athlete Activism and the Protest Paradigm**

A review of the literature shows a new form of racism that appears in media coverage. Some suggest that this new form of racism is similar to a re-coding of what White Power means. It is possible that we can find these new forms of racism in media coverage. Or perhaps a more interesting question is, can we see a new form of racism in the media coverage of athlete activism? And, is this new form of racism found in the way a story is framed? We characterize the new form of racism in media coverage in three ways: 1) A politically correct, coded language about issues related to race that adhere to, more than it departs from, generally accepted liberal principles and values; 2) Individuals who tend to deny racist intent of statements, opinions, thoughts, and behaviors and “blame others for circumstances;” and 3) Attempts to change the national discourse from inequalities due to race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class to narratives that center on cultural differentiation and American patriotism. All of these characteristics have been evidenced in the news coverage of the National Anthem Protests in the NFL.

The reason that athlete activism is such an issue is that group membership can seem to be compromised when an athlete of a particular team has views that differ from those of the fans. Since the murder of Eric Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, athletes have been more overt in their protests and activism. This includes members of the St. Louis Rams walking out onto the field in the “Hands up, Don’t shoot” stance, and NBA players wearing “I can’t breathe” shirts after Eric Garner’s death (Sanderson et al, 2016) These examples of activism although nonviolent spurred retaliation from fans disagreeing that police brutality is an issue or those that simply wanted politics to be kept out of the game (Pena, 2017)

In addition to fans arguing against athlete activism, news media also often appears to undermine the efforts of the protesters and also seem to portray the protest in a negative light. Over time, the trend in media coverage of protests that has emerged seems to undermine and delegitimize particular groups who protest. This is also referred to in the literature as the “protest paradigm” (Pena, 2017). The protest paradigm is essentially a framework that journalists typically follow when covering protests, and, according to Pena (2017) the paradigm appears to be influential in determining the legitimacy of the protests in the eyes of the public. Because of this immense influence in perceptions of legitimacy, media coverage of protests is one of the leading sources of discourse in our American culture.

Social media also has played a huge role, allowing for people to start hashtags or Facebook groups in order to discuss these acts of activism. However, according to Pena (2017) even with its own forum outside of traditional media coverage, the public still looks to traditional media to help them understand and respond to protests. This is the motivation for the present study. We analyze a wide range of news stories to determine how journalist’s frame stories about the protests made by athletes during the national anthem and the tone the frame takes when presented in a headline about the protest. Is it possible that partisan media sets the tone for discourse and public reaction to the athlete’s protest during the national anthem? The study will identify frames that occur commonly in U.S. news coverage about athletes and protests and the exploratory research hopes to identify if the framing of the topic of athlete activism by journalists sets a particular tone based on whether the media is left or right wing.

We hope the data obtained in the current study will show if partisan media are setting the tone and providing the framework for how the public should feel and think about the National Football League’s protest during the national anthem. It is also our research goal to determine if the framing of the protest by partisan media resembles an uncensored, fact-based, democratic process. It is possible to speculate that the democratic process followed in today’s media may be influenced by the way journalist’s frame and report on athletes, namely black athletes, and the silent protests that were conducted during the national anthem in the 2016 and 2017 football seasons (see Entman, 1993, p. 57). This line of research can potentially add to and further our knowledge of the theory and concept of framing and media coverage by providing empirical, quantitative data that illustrates how the issue of protests by athletes of color portrayed in partisan media.

**Theoretical Framework: Framing Theory**

This section on framing theory will begin with an introduction to the theory and definition of framing. The second part of the literature review will recapitulate literature covering framing theory and the use tone in media coverage. Next, we review research on effects related to media framing and tone of the frames.

Lastly, the literature review will conclude with an overview of research that explores the link between tone, framing, and media coverage in newspapers.

Several definitions of framing found in the literature provide us with common characteristics. According to Entman (1993), framing consists of “selecting aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, which results in the promotion of a particular definition of a problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation or treatment recommendation for the item described, or any combination of them” (p. 52). Further, Valkenburg, Semetko and de Vreese (1999) provide a similar definition by defining the concept of framing as the way in which journalists compose a news story in order to increase readership. Using this definition of the role of framing in media coverage we learn that “frames are used to simplify messages, maintain the attention of the reader and provide meaning to issues” (Valkenburg, Semetko & de Vreese, 1999).

According to Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007), framing theory and its use in media coverage are based on the idea that it is not how the journalist frame the story but how an issue is characterized in news reports that have an impact on audience interpretations. This is the theory of framing found in much of the mass communication literature. Framing research in mass communication has recently become popular in studies of media coverage. The current study uses the framing approach found in mass communication research journals that views framing as a sociological process of news production, focusing on the interpretative and rhetorical processes of news media discourse (see Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Gitlin, 1980; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

According to Tuchman (1978), journalists and other media have the ability and power to influence, mold, modify and create thoughts and beliefs among varied groups. The power to form and mold thoughts happens through the process of framing and the way news outlets choose what to cover and how to portray an issue. From a communications perspective, many feel that while journalists may follow the journalist’s creed and report issues and events objectively, they may inadvertently use frames in the news coverage that prevent their readers from making balanced and rational conclusions. Therefore, it is possible that the way the journalists frame their stories, they may “accidentally” encourage readers to make inaccurate attributions about issues or events. The current research hopes to explore this hypothesis by analyzing the headlines and the stories, the way they are framed, and the potential unintended consequences of these frames when writing about Colin Kaepernick and other athletes taking a knee during the playing of the national anthem.

When people are exposed to multiple and conflicting frames, research shows that this can cause cognitive dissonance and any effect of framing will be reduced and neutralized leaving audiences to rely more on their own internal frames (heuristics) that have been created over their lifetime, especially since frames are reference points by which all future decisions and judgments are made. Research shows that stress and the pressure of time can amplify both. (Banks, Salovey, Greener, Rothman, Moyer, Beauvals, & Epel, 1995; Salovey & Wegener, 2003; Salovey & Williams-Piehot, 2004; Scheufele, 1999). Data obtained in this study will provide quantitative results on the types of frames used to cover controversial and emotional issues like protests for racial equality, allowing researchers to use data to further explore the effects of exposure to specific frames identified in the study of headlines obtained in national news media.

Frames that are vague and lack context leads people to interpret things based on their internal expectations. Dorfman, Wallack & Woodruff (2005), describe two types of frames, news, and conceptual frames, and argue that these two frames help provide a framework on how to create and produce messages that determine what needs to be changed and how to create the change through the power of language. News frames guide journalists in deciding which details of a story to select and emphasize and which to leave out or de-emphasize. News frames help journalists provide meaning in stories, telling readers what is and what is not important (Entman, 1993).

### **Episodic and Thematic News Frames**

News frames refer to the structure of a story and are used by the news media to organize and present information so that it frames the event, the person, the conflict, and the facts. News frames are episodic and when people watch news stories with content and meaning, they are likely to gain insights and perhaps work to solve their own problems or accept consequences for their behavior. According to Dorfman et al (2005), reporters must do a better job to describe the events surrounding individuals so that the context of the issue becomes understandable and visible to the audience. This, according to Dorfman et al. (2005) is also known as a thematic story, and, according to the literature, thematic news stories engage viewers with information other than personal stories.

Thematic stories give readers background, consequences, facts, statistics and other evidence and cues that provide context and understanding of the issue at large. Iyengar (1991) found that viewers who are exposed to thematic stories understand and relate to the concept and are more likely to show effects from exposure to the frame. Iyengar (1991) also found that subjects showed episodic reports were less likely to consider society responsible for the event.

In one study discussed in the Iyengar's (1991) book, subjects who viewed stories about poverty that featured a concrete event/issue like the homeless or unemployed people (episodic framing) were much more likely to blame poverty on individual failings, such as laziness or low education, than were those who instead watched stories about high national rates of unemployment or poverty (thematic framing). Viewers of the thematic frames are more likely to attribute the causes of homeless and unemployment to governmental policies and other factors beyond the victim's control (Iyengar, 1991). While the current study does not involve obtaining survey responses from readers exposed to episodic or thematic frames, what we do hope to show is how partisan use these two frames in order to make their stories interesting and attractive to their readers.

In September of 2017, it was report by media that criticisms about the "take a knee" protests being exhibited by the NFL players were anti-military. If partisan media reported the coverage using a thematic frame, we expect to find the story about the Army Special Forces veteran, Green Beret and former NFL player, Nate Boyer, who reportedly met with Colin Kaepernick and encouraged him to kneel rather than sit during the anthem. Will media report this "fact" or will they rely on an episodic frame of the story and point the attention to the players, namely Colin Kaepernick as anti-American? The fact of the matter is that Kaepernick started his protest by sitting on the bench when the national anthem was being performed. Although he was not in uniform for the first three weeks of the 2016 football season, he sat on the bench. It was during the team's third preseason game that one journalists captured a photograph of Kaepernick, this time in uniform, sitting on the bench. It was after this coverage that the *Army Times* published its open letter to Kaepernick from the former NFL player, Boyer, who reported wrote very harsh sentiments to Colin. In the open letter, Boyer was said to "let Colin have it" and tell him how he felt. The two met after the letter was published and Boyer later posted a photo of him with Kaepernick after the meeting and he wrote "we sorta came to a middle ground where he would take a knee alongside his teammate. Soldiers take a knee of front of a fallen brother's grave, you know, and we go into a security halt, we take a knee, and we pull security" (published in the New York Times on September 25, 2017). We provide this information so that readers of this study will understand the types of frames we hope to find. We expect to find more of these stories or frames than stories focused on Colin Kapernick's supposed "take a knee" silent protest. If the media presents this story frequently, is it possible that fans would and will respond to the players who take a knee differently?

This literature and background led to the development of Hypothesis 1 and 2 in both measure the way partisan media framed stories of the NFL protests during the national anthem within national newspapers. The frames were recognized as either being episodic or thematic. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) explained that the way a headline and news story is reported could have an impact on how the audience interprets the story (p. 12). Taking this into consideration, the following hypotheses were formed:

**H1: Liberal media will frame news stories of the NFL protests during the national anthem using more objective facts (thematic frames) while conservative media will rely on episodic frames when covering the NFL protests.**

**H2: Episodic frames of headlines that mention protests during the national anthem will be more prominent in national conservative media than liberal media. And, thematic frames of headlines mentioning the NFL protests will be more prominent in national liberal media than conservative media**

### **The Relationship Between Tone and Media Framing**

Previous research stated that tone is an important part of media coverage. In this part of the literature review, we explore tone as a dependent variable and how it is used in news coverage. The content of news coverage is often characterized by the tone of voice. Tone, according to research, is also operationalized as valence (Brunken, 2006). Valence may be positive, neutral or negative (Brunken, 2006). In the current study, we analyzed the tone of voice found in the headline and in the story. According to previous work in this area, if the tone is applied to framing theory, research should show that some frames are indicative of 'good' versus 'bad' and will show positive and/or negative elements in the coverage (see work by de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003).

In fact, several studies have found that tone in media coverage has multiple significant effects and that tone influences audience members to think in a certain way about a particular issue (Brunken, 2006; Gunther, 1998; Kim, Carvalho & Cooksey, 2007; (McLeod & Detenber, 1999). It is our hope to determine the tone used in media coverage of the NFL protests in order to provide a baseline statistic for future research. With that in mind, hypothesis 3 measured the overall tone of the headlines as well as the of the news stories covering the protests of NFL athletes during the national anthem. The tone was recognized as angry/negative, neutral, or positive. Taking this into consideration, the following hypothesis was formed:

**H3: Headlines featuring mentions of the athletes of the NFL who kneel during the playing of the national anthems in United States newspapers will more frequently be positive in liberal media than mentions of the protest in conservative newspapers.**

### Methodology

In order to be in the sample, a crime story had to cover mass murders by a lone shooter. Over the study period 2016-2017, we collected and coded 445 stories about the NFL protests. It is important to note that the unit of analysis for this study is the report of the protest, not the national anthem itself. In other words, we coded 445 stories that were specifically centered on the NFL and kneeling during the national anthem.

### Unit of Analysis

We selected *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The LA Times*, and *Breitbart* because these were identified as partisan media cited as the most highly circulated newspapers. After the stories were gathered from newspaper archives, we read the stories line by line and, using SPSS, coded them “on what was portrayed, reported, suggested or implied in the context” (Grabe 1999). We coded a variety of variables.

We coded the headline to provide insight into the focus of the news story. As such, the coding of the headline into categories was based upon the main theme of the headline. Coding of the headlines was discrete, meaning that they only could be categorized into one of these themes, though not all headlines would fall into any.

A content analysis was designed and conducted for this study to test the statistical significance of relationships between partisan media and how they frame an issue. Content analysis is a quantitative research method that involves exploring the images and representation of subordinate groups in a representative sampling of media (Berger, 1991). Krippendorff (2004), defines content analysis in relation to this study as: “...the analysis of the manifest and latent content of a body of communicated material (as a news stories) through classification, tabulation, and evaluation of its keys symbols and themes in orders to ascertain its meaning and probable effect.” Similarly, Mittell (2004) defines content analysis as the setting of specific boundaries to measure within a selected group of programs and count the appearance of characters that fit into the identified categories. Mittell also suggests that content analysis is best for answering questions where the coding groups are clear-cut and objective such as with partisan media and the type of frame used.

To evaluate news media coverage of the NFL protest, we analyzed a random sample of news stories focused on the issue during the start of the 2016 NFL season and the end of the 2017 season. We began our study period in 2016 to capture a true picture of media coverage of the NFL and its athletes. We specifically sought news media with high circulation rates across the country so that we might be able to assess news coverage that reached a large subset of the American people.

To select news stories, with the help of our media librarians, we used ProQuest online archives to collect news media stories. Next, in order to obtain a sample of news stories, the following search terms were used: “Colin Kaepernick,” “Nate Boyer,” “what it means to kneel,” “Nate Boyer and Colin Kaepernick meeting,” “national anthem” or “protest” “athlete activism,” “NFL athletes protest,” “athletes protest equality,” “athletes and police shootings,” “football players and protest,” “national anthem protests nfl,” “silent protests and professional athletes,” “silent protests,” “national anthem protests,” “social protests,” “NFL national anthem protests,” “kneel during national anthem,” “star spangled banner,” and “national football league attacks.” We searched entire articles, including titles. From this unit of analysis, we selected a random sample of news stories. We then reviewed each story and excluded those that were not focused on NFL players, an NFL team AND the silent protest during the singing of the Star Spangled Banner.

News stories shorter than 100 words or classified as corrections, book reviews, letters to the editor, business or stock, obituaries, duplicate wire stories, story previews, or calendar reports were also excluded. Using these search criteria, our final sample consisted of 445 news stories.

### **Codebook and Coding Categories**

#### *1. Event Time*

- a. Past Event* - Historical background of event, things that were done prior to the event that made the situation better or worse, how the event could have been prevented, or what caused the event.
- b. Present Event* - The impact of the event, what is happening in the present or in the past few days/week, who was hurt, what is happening to people now, or what is going on with the current investigation.
- c. Future Event* - Prediction or analysis about what comes next, what changes will be made so that this doesn't happen again, how long will recovery take, how will the place look/be different in the future, or how people involved will be affected in the future.

#### *2. Event Space*

- a. Individual Level* - anecdotes, individual names, stories about the individual people in the event, really focuses on an individual or individuals, but doesn't just use a few individuals to tell a larger story about the community for example.
- b. Community Level* - talks about the people, organizations, or businesses in the community in the event, systems or groups.
- c. State/Regional/Multi-State Level* - larger than the community, talks about people in an entire large city, metropolitan area, or regional part of the country i.e. Mid-Missouri, Central Iowa, Oklahoma and Texas, Gulf Coast, Midwest.
- d. National/Societal Level* - event is framed in terms of social or national significance i.e. a disaster story may focus on infrastructure problems across the U.S.
- e. International Level* - event is framed from an international perspective.

#### *3. Framing*

- a. Episodic* - places blame on a particular individual or action.
- b. Thematic* - attributes conflict to underlying social issues

#### *4. Causes*

- a. Lack of patriotism, hating America, disrespect for veterans*
- b. Fighting racism and bigotry, social issues*
- c. Rebelling against Trump*
- d. Displaying a sense of unity/ in solidarity*
- e. Police brutality*

#### *5. Headline Tone*

- a. Positive* - uses positive words like encourages, supports, seems to take a favorable view of protests overall
- b. Negative* - uses negative words like slams, denounces, fires, seems to take a negative view of protests overall
- c. Neutral* - tone is unclear or combines positive and negative approach

#### *6. Subject's Characteristics*

- a. Racist* - Subject was described as a racist, said to hold racist views or was accused of racism. Also includes white nationalism
- b. Thug* - Subject was described as a thug or violent criminal
- c. Domestic Violence* - Subject was described as having abused or beaten a wife, spouse, girlfriend, or other partner of the same or opposite sex.
- d. Homosexual* - Subject was described as gay, homosexual, or bisexual, or to have had gay relationships

- e. *Homophobic* - Subject was described as hating or disliking homosexuals or gays specifically.
- f. *Religious* - Subject was described as religious, attended church regularly, or studied, read, or talked about religion.
- g. *Political* - Subject was described as political. Could be international or U.S. political issues.
- h. *Angry* - Subject was angry, rude, or mean.
- i. *Friendly* - Subject was described as friendly, helpful, nice, funny, or a good person.
- j. *Family* - Subject's family including parents, spouse, children, or siblings were mentioned or discussed.
- k. *Background* - Where subject grew up, went to school, the job the subject had and what they liked or wanted to do discussed. Does not include a discussion of what the subject was doing at the time of the action i.e. was currently a student, or currently lived in specific town.
- l. *Online/Social Media/ Video Games/ Apps* - Subject's online or social media presence was discussed. How the subject communicated or interacted online was discussed. Subject described as playing video games or online games.
- m. *Troublemaker/Disruptor/Instigator* - Subject is trying to cause trouble or make issues where there are none
- n. *"Employee of a Business"* - Subject is in a work/business environment working for a paycheck/salary
- o. *Anti-American* - Subject is labeled as anti-American if they are described as disrespecting veterans, the president, or the flag.
- p. *Activist* - Subject engages in activism - look for the specific word.
- q. *Protester* - Subject's actions are described as protests - look for the specific word.

### **Coder Training and Reliability**

Training took place over two weeks; each weekly session lasted one hour. During these sessions, the coders practiced on several news stories so that they and the investigator could identify and resolve problems with the coding scheme. Coders met to discuss the reasoning behind their choices and then made the codebook more precise based on this discussion. After the coding scheme was modified on the basis of these practice rounds, coding was then independent.

Inter-coder reliability was measured using percent agreement (also called simple agreement). Pairwise agreements were calculated by coding to agree or disagree. Since multiple coders were used in this study, we calculated the average pairwise agreement among all possible coder pairs across multiple observations. According to Neuendorf (2002), coefficients of .90 or greater are nearly always acceptable, .80 or greater is acceptable in most situations, and .70 may be appropriate in some exploratory studies for some indices" (p. 145).

To analyze the content of news coverage, we developed a coding instrument. A random sample of ten news stories was independently coded by five coders to assess inter-coder reliability for each category. Reliability for each item was measured using Krippendorff alpha statistics, which all met conventional standards for adequate reliability of 0.79 or higher. According to Krippendorff (2004ab), alphas greater than .80 will provide researchers with high-quality data—producing results that are reliable and valid.

### **Data Analysis**

For each measure related to news media portrayals of the association among race, mental health and mass shootings, a  $\chi^2$  test was used to compare the proportion of news stories by partisan media that covered the NFL protest and we also coded the frames used in the headlines and in the story. We were interested in how media used facts and other objective data to cover the protest. We measured ethnicity and mentions of a race to assess differences in news coverage with respect to the athlete's race is mentioned in stories about the protest. Specifically, we examined whether partisan news media mentions the race of an athlete when reporting on the protest.

### **Results**

During the coding period, there were 445 articles obtained specifically focused on athletes and the NFL protests. Frequencies and crosstabs were used to show how many stories were found in partisan media and their coverage of professional football players and the silent protests held during the playing of the national anthem.



The independent variable, partisan media and the dependent variables, frames used in headlines, news stories, and tone of the frames were also used to make comparisons. Chi-square analyses were then used to show whether there was a significant difference in partisan media and the types of frames and tone. All articles that featured the stories on the protests found and published on the websites of the most read partisan media were included in the data. Results from each individual source are included.

Data indicated that of the 445 media stories coded, more news stories were written about the protests by liberal and moderate media than white male athletes (85%) than conservative media (15%),  $p < .0000$ . A review of the data and number of stories analyzed presented in Table 1 show that of all the news stories published, liberal and moderate media published more thematic news stories than did conservative media. The difference in this type of coverage by partisan media was significant ( $p < .0000$ ).

H1: Liberal media will frame news stories of the NFL protests during the national anthem using more objective facts (thematic frames) while conservative media will rely on episodic frames when covering the NFL protests.

**SUPPORTED**

Table 1

*Results of Chi-square Test and Descriptive Statistics for Partisan Media and Framing of News Stories Covering NFL Protests*

Partisan Media (N=445)				
Frame	F	Li	M	Con
	beral	oderate	servative	
Episodic	100 (47%)	17 (29%)	4 (75%)	52
Thematic	14 (53%)	15 (71%)	1 (25%)	17
Total	114 (48%)	62 (37%)	1 (15%)	69

Note.  $X^2 = 42.6$ ,  $df = 2$ . Numbers in parentheses indicate row percentages. \* $p < .0000$

H2: Episodic frames of headlines that mention protests during the national anthem will be more prominent in national conservative media than liberal media. And, thematic frames of headlines mentioning the NFL protests will be more prominent in national liberal media than conservative media (**NOT SUPPORTED**)

Data presented in Table 2 shows that in terms of the framing of the headlines by partisan media, conservative media published significantly more headlines using statistics and objective cues than liberal media ( $p < .01$ ). Data reveal that coverage of the NFL protests by conservative media centered more on thematic frames compared to episodic frames ( $p < .01$ ). Liberal and moderate media were found to publish headlines that were episodic or focused on the individual athlete or the NFL organization.

Table 2:

*Results of Chi-square Test and Descriptive Statistics for Partisan Media and Framing of Headlines of News Stories Covering NFL Protests*

Partisan Media (N=445)				
Frame	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	
Episodic	9 9 (46%)	1 1 (56%)	9 (31%)	22
Thematic	1 15 (54%)	7 2 (44%)	7 (69%)	47

*Note.*  $X^2 = 12.2$ ,  $df = 2$ . Numbers in parentheses indicate row percentages. \* $p < .01$

Hypothesis 3 analyzed the tone used in media coverage of the NFL protests in order to provide a baseline statistic for future research. Data presented in Table 3 shows a significant difference in the overall tone of the headlines as well as the of the news stories covering the protests of NFL athletes during the national anthem ( $p < .0000$ ). Recall that tone of the headline and news story was coded as angry/negative, neutral, or positive. Data show that liberal and moderate media tend to publish more positively valence news stories about the NFL protests than conservative media,  $p < .0001$ . As Table 3 shows, the tone was significantly more frequent for stories published by liberal and moderate media,  $p < .0001$ .

H3: Headlines featuring mentions of the athletes of the NFL who kneel during the playing of the national anthems in United States newspapers will more frequently be positive in liberal media than mentions of the protest in conservative newspapers. (**SUPPORTED**)

Table 3

*Results of Chi-square Test for Partisan Media and Tone of News Stories about the NFL Protests*

Partisan Media (N=445)				
Tone	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	
Angry	4 4 (21%)	4 7 (31%)	4 (0%)	2
Neutral	1 10 (44%)	7 7 (32%)	7 (24%)	55
Positive	7 10 (59%)	3 8 (32%)	3 (9%)	11
Total	14 (48%)	22 (37%)	14 (15%)	69

*Note.*  $X^2 = 37.9$ ,  $df = 4$ . Numbers in parentheses indicate row percentages. \* $p < .0000$

## Discussion

As discussed previously in the literature review, news frames refer to the structure of a story and data obtained in this study further illustrate how these frames are used by the news media to organize and present information about the “take a knee” silent protests displayed by NFL players.

We obtained data that found partisan media tend to publish episodic news frames about individual athletes or teams that align with the rationale and motivation behind the silent protest. Data further showed that when compared to conservative media, liberal and moderate media are more likely to publish stories that centered on the context and events surrounding the protests. Consistent with research conducted by Dorfman et al (2005), the data obtained in this seminal study suggest that while liberal and moderate reporters rely on thematic frames and facts to report the issues related to the protests, conservative media and journalists must do a better job to describe the events surrounding athletes and their activism so that the context of the issue becomes understandable and visible to the audience.

According to Dorfman et al. (2005) providing the context of an issue is referred to as a thematic story, and, according to chi-square analysis of the data we obtained, liberal and moderate media published significantly more thematic news stories that gave readers background, consequences, and facts of the protests. Even though stories were not found that covered the Boyer-Kaepernick meeting and how the idea of the “take a knee” actually started, we did find evidence that suggested that conservative media focused on the context of police brutality and racial inequality. Iyengar (1991) found that viewers who are exposed to thematic stories understand and relate to the concept and are more likely to show effects from exposure to the frame. Iyengar (1991) also found that subjects showed episodic reports were less likely to consider society responsible for the event.

Consistent with prior research, data obtained in this study found that media frames and tone in media coverage have a symbiotic relationship. Results show that the tone used in media coverage of the NFL protests was more positive in stories and headlines published by liberal and moderate media. We also found that conservative media used thematic headlines more often than headlines found in liberal or moderate media. What is not known is the relationship between the attributes of the frames in the stories and the headlines (i.e., words used in the story and types of facts, consequences, and backgrounds)? What is the purpose and/or effect of a thematic headline used in the body of an episodic news story? Future research should expand on the finding in this study and determine how partisan media use episodic and thematic frames in headlines with episodic and thematic frames in the body of the news story.

Athletes here in America are citizens too. Athletes have feelings, thoughts, experiences, interests and have opinions. They also have their political views that the general public will not even begin to understand. When the Missouri Football team boycotted in response to the protests in November 2015, several MU donors were so angry that they threatened to stop donating to the athletic department and scholarships. But, why? They are, in reality, student-athletes. Students who are also affected by some of the institutional policies that were being contested at the time. It is an interesting discussion that seems to be ongoing even as of this writing. How would readers respond if partisan media focused on on the thematic issues that led to the CS1950 protest of 2015? Experimental research using episodic and thematic frames should determine the impact and effects of exposure to these two frames on readers attribution of blame.

Currently, sports and politics have been shown by the behaviors of athletes who use their platform to stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. By kneeling during the playing of the national anthem, Colin Kaepernick uses his celebrity to highlight issues which he — and many others — see as injustices that need to be addressed in our country. The “take a knee” silent protest has been the focus of many in the sports media world and has been embroiled in a debate on whether or not athletes should just “stick to sports.” The phrase comes from a common rebuke directed at players and coaches who take a political stance on anything that does not relate to their sport.

The discussion of athletes and protests now seems to bring with it a sense of urgency and relevance that our culture has not seen or experienced since those protests of the '60s and early '70s, when athletes like Jim Brown, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Muhammad Ali, and Arthur Ashe openly talked about civil rights. Following their fifth Super Bowl victory, New England Patriots' key players like Tom Brady, Devin McCourty, Martellus Bennett, Dont'a Hightower, Chris Long, and LeGarrette Blount made a public announcement that they would not make the traditional victory visit to the White House. And in April 2017, photos taken at the White House showed that they did miss/skip the traditional White House visit and a chance to be praised by newly elected President Donald Trump. The Super Bowl victory for the Patriots in 2017 has been deemed the greatest comeback in Super Bowl history. Earlier in the season many of the Patriot players mentioned previously raised fists in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick's national-anthem protest.

The news coverage that the athletes stated that they would reject an invitation for political reasons incited, once again, a “stick to sports” criticism in response to their decision to boycott the visit.

While this is much-needed exploratory research, the study is not without its limitations. Online newspapers were the only form of media used for this study. Future research might build on this include other forms of media such as radio, magazines, television, news transcripts, or news sources. It is possible that the database provided may have also added limits to the study because not all newspapers may have been accessible through the database. The research method may also be perceived as a limitation. During the coding procedure, only one story and one tone for each article were coded. This choice was made because we focused on the media coverage of the NFL protest- the protest was the central research topic. The main purpose of the research was to study the content and tone of the media coverage with regard to the NFL protests during the national anthem, in order to acquire a view of what partisan newspaper readers actually read concerning the silent protest. Entman’s (1993) episodic and thematic frames were used as a tool to operationalize the concept of content. This combination was used in the current study and data obtained provides an indication that frame and tone may correlate, that tone may significantly differ for each type of frame and that there could be significant differences in the use of frame for each type of partisan media. Considering that few stories were found in partisan media that told the story of Nate Boyer and Colin Kaepernick’s meeting and the fact that it was Boyer who influenced the player to kneel in lieu of sitting, we suggest future research explore and uncover reasons why this particular backstory was not part of the narrative found in published news stories about the protest. To be 100% certain of these indications, future research in the specific field of media frames should be undertaken to determine if there are actually significant correlations and differences in the tone per frame and the use of frames per type of media.

## Conclusion

American culture has, for the most part, widely revered athletes. Sports have, here in the US, allowed athletes to achieve a level of status with which they can express themselves and be heard, a public awareness that might not be given to the average American. Perhaps this is why that many of the athletes who speak out and take activism seriously are often times people of color or women. African Americans have been systematically denied access to political, social and economic positions. As a result, athletes have used their publicly visible as recognized and publicly respected positions to give voice to those whose voices would otherwise not be heard. Currently, Kaepernick is just one athlete who exemplifies the idea of exercising his celebrity influence to bring awareness to an issue. Kaepernick uses platforms like Twitter and other media to address the issue of injustices to men of color in America. There is no doubt that we have athletes who are influential public figures who also exhibit the courage and passion to use their status so that they may articulate and advocate ideas for social change and civil rights. It is now time for media, both the extreme left and extreme right to recognize and report.

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