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The Art of 'Stick to Sports,' Politics, and Sports Media Industry Studies

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THE ART OF 'STICK TO SPORTS,' POLITICS, AND SPORTS MEDIA INDUSTRY
STUDIES

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Abstract

This thesis aims at unpacking the discourse of “stick to sports,” which audiences wield to police social and cultural boundaries and battles involving race, gender, and politics. The melding of sports and politics, primarily through social media platforms, riles up audiences resulting in arguments where larger social issues are deliberated and processed. The stick to sports discourse is used to dictate who can and can’t speak and what kinds of discussions are appropriate in relation to sports. The sports network ESPN is a site for understanding how corporations leverage this discourse and use it to claim political neutrality, while disciplining employees for veering too far politically. This research will rely on several sites that will analyze the "stick to sports" discourse through industry practices and articulations of the discourse, utilizing Havens et al.’s (2009) critical media industry studies approach. ESPN will be a main source, while outside sports organizations will also be highlighted. Some of the sites include Dan Le Batard's political rant, the sports debate show “First Take,” gender roles, Clay Travis and the NBA, Deadspin are all analyzed.

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Introduction

“‘Stick to sports’ is a novel articulation of a thinly veiled euphemism for ‘don’t speak truth to power’” (GMG Union, 2019). This thesis aims at unpacking the “stick to sports” discourse, in which audiences wield to police social and cultural boundaries and battles involving race, gender, and politics. The discourse is used to dictate who can and can’t speak and what kinds of discussions are appropriate concerning sports. Sports media industries use this discourse of “stick to sports” as leverage to push for political neutrality where efficacious. The idea of “stick to sports” isn’t new, however, in fact, it was incorporated in ESPN’s mission statement when the company launched in 1979.

What we’re creating here is a network for sports junkies. This is not for soft-core sports fans who like to watch an NFL game and then switch to the news.

This is a network for people who like to watch a college football game, then a wrestling match, gymnastics meet, and a soccer game, followed by an hour-long talk show—on sports (Vogan, 2015).

This “stick to sports” discourse will be explored through several sites across sports media. ESPN is one of the main sites that will be analyzed throughout this study, along with other sports media industries. The culture of ESPN, industry practices, and articulations of the stick to sports discourse will be analyzed through Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz, and Serra Tinic’s (2009) critical media industry studies approach and conceptual toolkit, while examining ancillary strands of the discourse in sports media and society.

Chp. 1 – Worldwide Leader in Sports and “Stick to Sports”

ESPN’s president at the time of this writing (in 2020), Jimmy Pitaro, transferred from Disney (the parent company of ESPN) in 2018, where he was previously the head of Disney’s digital and consumer products division (Kafka, 2019). Upon his arrival, Pitaro announced a “No-Politics” policy, detailing the exclusion of “pure” politics (Flood, 2019). ESPN received substantive criticism for being too political under the previous president John Skipper (Marchand, 2019). According to John Ourand at the Sports Business Journal, ESPN’s polling from June 2019 showed 85% of avid sports fans didn’t want politics on ESPN (Kinkead, 2019). Ourand also reported on ESPN’s usage of a single focus group comment to justify its desired neutrality:

ESPN also shared one anonymous comment that it collected from a focus group that the network feels best illustrates a common view: people come to ESPN to get a break from the political news cycle: "There are so many places where I get news about politics, and I don't need it on ESPN. When you introduce that element of broad politics, it ruins having a diversion" (Burns, 2019).

Internally, ESPN is building a calcifying logic, a form of digital lore (Burroughs, 2019; Burroughs 2015), about the audience to justify the need to present all sports apolitically, divorced from controversy. John Skipper was open to the on-air talent on the network vocalizing their political opinion, but Pitaro is of the mindset to “stick to sports” (Wagner, 2018).

Disney bought ESPN in 1996 for \$19 billion, which was the second-largest corporate takeover ever at the time (Vogan, 2015). With this acquisition came shifts like SportsCenter

segments taped from Disneyland, incessant promotions for Disney's sports-themed films, and suspicion that the Anaheim Mighty Ducks and the Los Angeles Angels received more attention than other sports franchises, which were both Disney-owned (p. 38). Disney quickly eliminated ABC's long-running sports show, *Wide World of Sports*, which lasted 37 years on air until 1998. During that same year, ESPN adopted its popular slogan: "Worldwide Leader in Sports." In 2006, ABC Sports rebranded itself as "ESPN on ABC" and *Monday Night Football* moved over to the network (p. 39). Previously, Disney, as a company, had minimal experience in the sports arena, making Pitaro's move from Disney to ESPN look questionable from a sports perspective. However, when thinking from a branding or corporate synergy vantage point, the desire to enforce an apolitical ethos makes discursive sense.

Critical Media Industry Studies

This study pulls from Havens, Lotz, and Tinic's (2009) "critical media industry studies" approach to understand how this "stick to sports" discourse permeates within the sports media industry, primarily on the ESPN platform, and the power and control sports media industries wield over employees and audiences to stay within the artificial parameters of neutrality. Havens et al. (2009) want to emphasize the centrality of the term "industry" by acknowledging its importance within society and cultural studies literature. They propose a "critical media industry studies through grounded institutional case studies that examine the relationships between strategies and tactics" (p. 247). Similarly, this thesis borrows from that approach, altering the criteria to fit sports media. Therefore, we will be viewing case studies within the sports industry that reveal several strategies and tactics to keep sports coherent. To date, sports media and the

role of sports in society remain under-examined within academic research from a critical media industry lens.

Despite the minimal amount of scholarly research conjoining “critical media industry studies” and “sport,” Steven Secular (2019)’s research does highlight the mediatization and marketization of sport from the 1980s through the mid-2010s. His primary focus is on the National Basketball Association (NBA) while also viewing sport’s relationship with media industries. In *ESPN: The Making of A Sports Media Empire*, Travis Vogan (2015) pioneeringly researched ESPN’s culture, and the companies attempt to build authority within and beyond sports media (p. 3). Vogan outlines how “ESPN’s efforts to build refinement augment its global activities, event coverage, and news programming” (p. 9). This refinement was an institutional strategy built through its programming, but also discursively from industry practices and sports coverage to impact sports fans and consumers.

Vogan’s work has a “focus on ESPN’s institutional operations demonstrates how the company urges consumers to understand it.” Whereas Vogan offers a semi-history on ESPN and its impact on the sports industry, this research identifies contemporary articulations of sports discourse that serve as ruptures in the unity of sports. Sports networks use “stick to sports” to regulate and discipline their employees and fans by placing barriers around controversy. This research will combine the works of Vogan (2015) and Secular (2019), while relying on Haven’s et al. (2009) critical media industry studies approach, to carve out a conceptual toolkit and qualitative space in sports media scholarship.

Serazio and Thorson (2020) found through a survey of sports fans that players are expected to avoid politics because they’re perceived “as threatening to society, not intellectually

equipped to engage, and illegitimate as leaders” (p. 151). They identify as one of the “perils of politicizing sports” a category they label as ““stick to sports’ simplicity” (p. 159). Fans responded that politics isn’t “the job” of players, and players should focus on improving their performance on the field. We would extend this point to argue that the “stick to sport’s” discourse goes beyond the talk of sports fans and is used by media industries and fans to continually reinscribe institutional power. Sticking to sports is a learned fan behavior and emergent shared set of values, as athletes are regularly disciplined, marginalized, and silenced for refusing to “stick to sports.”

We also argue that the ability or privilege inherent in positioning yourself outside of sports and politics, is itself political. Sports are already political. The ability to disassociate politics and sports, to call for neutrality or claim sports as a sanctuary of leisure and distraction, is a form of ideological boundary work. Previous scholarship related to this area has focused on “discovering new definitions of sports entrepreneurship & sports product” (Vamplew, 2018), industry responses to public memorialization and tragedy (Burroughs et al., 2019), “media framing involving NFL concussions & ESPN.com writers” (Karimipour & Hull, 2017), “athletes gender disparity with body issues on Instagram in ESPN Magazine” (Santarossa, Coyne, Woodruff, & Greenham, 2019), and “critiquing ESPN Films ‘Nine for IX’ series” (Antunovic & Linden, 2020).

Locating a History of “Stick to Sports”

There are countless examples of ruptures in the facade of sports' depoliticization. This brief history of the discourse of 'stick to sports' identifies some of the major sites of contention before this discourse was expressly named and calcified amongst audiences and sports media industries. First, Cottrell and Nelson (2011) used cases of Olympic protests between 1896 and 2008 to show the political potency of the global spectacle. Their examples of politicization from the Olympics included demonstrations, bans, and boycotts (while teasing general protests). From that, four major trends emerged, "(1) the number of protests increased over time, (2) the Olympics served as a site for political contention, (3) they dictated as a peace-building gambit, and (4) the birth of depoliticization" (pp. 737-740). These traits exhibited that the Olympics were a site for internal, institutional disputes over being a political or nonpartisan global event. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) renounced sport politics (Boykoff, 2017). More specifically, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the IOC, asserted that "the Olympics should transcend politics" (p. 163).

Herein, we see an articulation of a desire for an apolitical global sports ecosystem positioned to rise above and transcend politics. Jonathan Grix (2013) explains how this 'soft power' concept enveloped the Olympics. Soft power, more or less, is the ability to shape the preferences of others (Nye, 2005). Grix (2013) details soft power's influence over domestic values. He highlights the improvement of a nation's image, promotion through inbound tourism, and increased trade, which adds a sense of national pride (p. 13). Through the usage of soft power, the Olympics (and specifically the IOC), tries to discursively enforce the idea of "stick to sports" globally and institutionally. However, plenty of political connotations are intertwined and cinched with the Olympics, such as the Depression Games in 1932 and the Nazi Games in 1936, through the Cold War and beyond (p. 166). Cottrell and Nelson (2011) call the Olympics "high-

profile events,” and an attractive site of spectacle due to the magnitude of the event and the size and scope of the audience, feeding into the expansion of media coverage (p. 738).

Nazi Games

The 1936 Olympics were hosted in Berlin, Germany, under the regime of Adolf Hitler. It was the second time Berlin held the Olympics, but revolutionary because they were the first to be televised, combined with the fact that they introduced the ceremonial torch relay (Walker, 2016). The United States was under immense pressure thanks to Hitler’s promise of Aryan dominance (“From Buckeye to National Hero,” n.d.). Although Hitler’s predictions were correct about the overall medal count, Jesse Owens put a chink in that argument, displaying his superiority in track & field (Walker, 2016). As transcribed from Jeremy Schaap’s (2015) prologue, “While much of the rest of the world kowtowed to the Nazis, Owens stood up to them at their own Olympics, refuting their venomous theories with his awesome deeds” (Prologue, xv). Unfortunately, his successes and struggle for racial equality were muted upon his return to the United States. Owens and other African American Olympians returned to the routine of their segregated communities (Koren, 2016). They were even denied an invitation to the White House, which was only given to white Olympians (“Why Was Jesse Owens,” 2016). Despite being snubbed by his country, Owens seemed more concerned with issues of racial injustice:

I’d spent my whole life watching my father and mother and older brothers and sisters trying to escape their own kind of Hitler, first in Alabama and then in Cleveland, and all I wanted now was my chance to run as fast and

jump as far as I could, so I'd never have to look back. If I could just win those gold medals, I said to myself, the Hitlers of the world would have no more meaning for me. For anyone, maybe ("Why Was Jesse Owens," 2016).

It took 80 years for the African Americans of the 1936 Olympics to be commemorated when President Barack Obama invited the relatives of those black Olympians to the White House honoring their accomplishments (Koren, 2016).

The notion of "stick to sports" existed alongside athlete activism during the 1960s and 70s. Muhammad Ali, for example, refused to enlist in the military, costing him three years away from boxing and forfeiture of his championship title (Brown & Brison, 2017). Tommie Smith and John Carlos removed their shoes, wore beads, a scarf, head tilted towards the ground, and raised fists in the air to protest lynching's during the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City (p. 253). The "Syracuse 8" included nine African American football players fighting for equality by starting a petition requesting equal access to tutors, academic advisors, and medical staff. Tennis player Billie Jean King threatened to boycott the U.S. Open if men and women weren't paid equally. The U.S. Open granted this wish in 1973 by becoming the first Grand Slam tournament to award equal payment amounts to both genders (p. 254).

More recently, U.S. women's soccer players continue to campaign for the same right. Several women from the U.S. Women's World Cup 2015 team sued the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) due to unequal field conditions. Following their World Cup win in 2015, the team launched their "Equal Play, Equal Pay" campaign, which argued against gender ideologies of difference for similar treatment of men and women for the

U.S. Soccer Federation. In 2017, the team signed a new collective bargaining agreement with U.S. Soccer that included increased compensation and improved travel conditions (Allison, 2018). After they defended their title in 2019, they continued their advocacy for equality in treatment and pay.

Women's appearances on major sports networks are scarce with SportsCenter offering less coverage than other sports outlets (Duncan & Messner, 1998). Also, they are seldom in commercials, unless accompanied by men and act as sexual rewards for men's accomplishments (Messner, 2000). Commentators praise aggression, violence, sacrifice, grit, among other qualities that signify a "man" (pp. 385-390). Meanwhile, women are portrayed as the "more emotional sex" (Shields, 2002). With this in mind, the media symbolizes gender first, athlete second (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983). For example, when men compete in "feminine" sports, the rules are modified to accentuate masculinity (Allison, 2018). Thus, ostracizing one gender to validate the other. Peter Burke (1991) calls this the "tightly controlled identity," which capitalizes on matching ones "reflected appraisals" to the "actual identity" (pp. 843).

Kaepernick's Non-"Stick to Sports" Protest

One singular point where the "stick to sports" mantra was leveraged by fans and media personalities against advocacy and crystalized as a discourse would surround Colin Kaepernick. Colin Kaepernick's decision to kneel during the national anthem in the 2016 NFL season triggered a rupture, a puncturing of the neutral facade of sports media and institutions like the NFL. His choice to first sit-in protest, and then kneel, didn't even break any league rules

(officially players were “encouraged but not required” to stand for the anthem) (Boren, 2016). Yet, Kaepernick’s actions to protest against police brutality and racism in American provoked severe reactions from fans and media personalities, including burning his jersey and a barrage of digital malice.

Serenity Duvall (2020) tackles how the “far-right” social media users denigrate Kaepernick’s celebrity status and position black athletes as being too privileged to participate in a protest. Duvall inspects his race, religion, and appearance, demarcating “collective far-right outrage” and shared far-right grievances used to frame Kaepernick as an egotistical bigot. Using far-right discourse, Kaepernick was labeled as a “race traitor,” “emasculated thug,” and “self-indulgent celebrity” (pp. 9-12). Duvall writes how his physical appearance, mainly his afro, was a source of pride, subsequently dehumanizing him, stating, “The afro--as a symbol of Black pride and militancy since at least the civil rights era--rankled White critics who used it to denigrate him as uncivilized and animalistic, reinforcing centuries of stereotypes” (p. 12). For Rugg (2019), the NFL response to Kaepernick and other NFL players protests was an act of “subsuming their social justice efforts under the auspices of a campaign that evades the ideological confrontation of the kneeling protests in favor of a more positive, market-friendly version of “justice” based in calls of unity” (p. 1).

Pena (2017) researched how the media configured its coverage. He labels Kaepernick’s protest as a “debate frame,” which positions the argument worthy of discussion, a method that complemented Kaepernick’s goal (p. 45). The problem, however, was that the coverage coalesced around issues of patriotism, credibility, and the NFL’s future all before considering the substance of his protest. Kaepernick’s protest for social justice reform attempted to hurdle over the accompanying backlash, ultimately risking his entire career in the pursuit of human rights as

far-right voices pushed to contain and cordon off this political speech. Just like musicians and actors should stick to their professions and not mix entertainment with politics (for example, the Dixie Chicks infamously were told to “shut up and sing” after criticizing then-President George W. Bush), athletes should just “shut up and play”--they should “stick to sports.” Despite the discourse’s efforts to silence and marginalize, athlete activists still speak out, and with the proliferation of social media platforms, their causes are broadcast through a myriad of channels.

“I’m Done Hiding!”

Dan Le Batard began his ESPN tenure during the late 1990s when he became a staff member of ESPN: The Magazine’s (espnpressroom.com). For almost 30 years, Le Batard worked as a columnist at the Miami Herald, where he grew up and later graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and Politics from the University of Miami. Le Batard birthed his show, Highly Questionable (HQ), with his father and a rotating guest in 2011, while his brand-named show (The Dan Le Batard Show with Stugotz) debuted on ESPN Radio in 2015 (“Highly Questionable,” 2020; espnpressroom.com). The difference between the shows is that HQ pairs comedic relief with sports commentary, whereas The Dan Le Batard Show synthesizes “self-deprecating humor, insightful guests, and thoughtful conversation” (espnpressroom.com).

On July 17, President Trump spoke at a rally in North Carolina, where he criticized Democratic Representative Ilhan Omar, a Somali refugee who became an American citizen. Chants of “send her back” echoed from the crowd, as Trump not only aided the chants but seemed to relish in the crowd responding to his provocations. ESPN’s Dan Le Batard spoke

about the matter on his show. He called Trump's actions "un-American" and added that President Trump was wrongly "trying to get reelected by dividing the masses, at a time when the old white man, the old rich white man, feels oppressed, being attacked, by minorities" (Strauss, 2019). Le Batard was very critical about ESPN's policy regarding political commentary and said emphatically, "We here at ESPN don't have the stomach for the fight. We don't talk about what is happening unless there is some sort of weak, cowardly sports angel that we can run it through." Continuing, he talked about the policy being misguided due to sport's place in political history with athletes including Muhammed Ali, Jim Brown, Bill Russell, and others (Strauss, 2019).

This wasn't Le Batard's first run-in with Trump and far from his first foray into political debates. In 2017 the president enacted a travel ban against Muslims. Fellow ESPN employee Sage Steele took to Instagram to comment on how she was saddened over being inconvenienced by protesters at the Los Angeles Airport that made her miss her flight. Le Batard pounced. He criticized Steele for her complaints, but poignantly critiqued ESPN for allowing this kind of social media posting that he viewed as also political (Barstow, 2017). Being of Cuban descent himself, Le Batard was disgusted at his colleague's insensitivity. He referred to her remarks as "the height of privilege," and said that Steele opened "the floodgates for the rest of us" (Barstow, 2017). Le Batard's point was that ESPN was duplicitous in allowing politically charged social media posts on the one hand, but reigning in any on-air politics. Despite the inauguration of the 'No-Politics Policy,' Le Batard straddled the line between sports and politics, continually stoking political fires with sports commentary.

If ESPN believed that to expunge political banter, they just had to slap a "stick to sports" band-aid on it, they were mistaken. Le Batard thought the network's rationale was nothing short

of illogical (Thomas, 2019). In 2014, Le Batard was given a two-day suspension for his role in a billboard “stunt” chiding LeBron James for his move back to Cleveland from Miami (Chase, 2014). In other forms of controversy, he defied the Baseball Writers’ Association of America for ‘moralizing’ the vote, offering his Hall of Fame ballot to Deadspin and was heartbroken when then-President Obama, along with the MLB, convoyed to Cuba for an exhibition game. Le Batard used his platform to voice his strong concern for the United States government seeming to show support for the Cuban regime at the potential expense of the Cuban people (Hoffarth, 2019).

Returning to Le Batard’s comments regarding President Trump and his campaign rally, a memo from ESPN’s Executive Vice President Norby Williamson was sent out immediately after his statements on-air reminding employees to avoid “pure politics” and deliver sports as a “distraction from heavy issues” (Parker, 2019). The memo explained that an employee should bring any political feelings to the attention of higher-ups at ESPN, and they’ll figure out how to address it. The memo says, “If someone feels strong about something, please come to us, and we’ll have a thoughtful discussion on how and where they can address” (para. 5). Within this broader debate about the role of sports in issues related to social justice, politics, and gender, ESPN as a company deploys the discourse to sanitize sports from anything controversial so it is palatable for the masses. Neutrality is a stance that reinforces discourses that say ‘we’ don’t want sports to be a site for deliberating over social issues. ESPN, as a sports media industry, benefits economically from this posturing but also calcifies the discourse within a broader sports culture and in society.

The “stick to sports” mandate expresses a double standard of “don’t speak truth to power,” but also “keep the fans happy.” Ourand’s findings of most (85%) sports fans

disapproving of the inclusion of politics and sports are critical to ESPN's aggressive approach with the mandate. Ratings are essential for determining the profitability of a company. Eileen Meehan (1986) calls ratings the 'tangible proof' that the audience exists (p. 450). Meehan writes, "the commodity audience comes to be defined by the dominant rating firm's methodology. And that methodology is itself a function of economic pressures including cost efficiency and profitability of ratings production, corporate tactics used to gain and maintain monopoly status, manipulation of discontinuities in demand for ratings, etc." (p. 450). So, by ESPN disciplining Le Batard for his comments, it exemplifies his mistake as inexcusable, and the memo reiterates the importance of catering to audience satisfaction.

Sorry ESPN, "Stick to Sports" Can Wait

ESPN buttressed its "stick to sports" mandate when Dan Le Batard spoke out against President Trump, but he wasn't the first employee to do so. Jemele Hill, a former ESPN analyst, lost her job in response to a similar incident. This serves as yet another moment of rupture wherein the political valence of ESPN is made visible, displaying an institutional practice of "stick to sports." In 2017, she tweeted, "Donald Trump is a white supremacist who has largely surrounded himself with other white supremacists" (Miller, 2018). Hill received significant backlash for provoking President Trump, forming a rift between herself and ESPN. This led to White House Press Secretary, Sarah Sanders, calling for ESPN to fire Hill. Although her efforts were unsuccessful, President Trump responded to Hill on October 10, 2017, claiming that her actions were the reason ESPN's rankings were falling. Thus, President Trump was enacting the discourse of "stick to sports," self-servingly urging ESPN to choose revenue by silencing an

employee. This sparked fans' agitation with the amount of political content on ESPN devolving into “stereotypical tropes and uncivil discourse” (Harrison, Pergoraro, Romney, & Hull, 2019). The growth of social media has given fans, franchises, and athletes an increased ability to engage in discussion and cultural discourse (Sanderson, 2011). Hill ultimately agreed to a buyout with ESPN in 2018, after spending 12 years with the company (Miller, 2018).

Skipper pronounced that Hill squandered the extraordinary opportunities granted to her, because of her lapse in judgment. When Jimmy Pitaro overtook the company the following year, he attempted to minimize the perception that ESPN had a “political agenda” (Miller, 2018). Therefore, the “No-Politics” policy was a perfect justification to “stick to sports.” Disney’s Chairman, Bob Iger, supported Pitaro’s strategy, and Hill saw the writing on the wall. She recalls that she and Michael Smith (partner on “His & Hers” and “SportsCenter 6”) were demarcated as “political” even before the President Trump incident, which she believed emanated from their African-American heritage (Miller, 2018). A spokesperson for ESPN, during the time of Hill’s tweet, said that her personal beliefs were fine, but not to share them publicly, given that she also represents the network (Bieler, 2017). Hill, similar to Kaepernick, jeopardized her career by using her voice and platform.

ESPN tried to persuade Hill to stay at the network after the fallout, offering her positions on “Highly Questionable,” “SportsNation” (now canceled), or the opportunity to conduct some in-depth work for its more cultural site, “The Undefeated” (Marchand, 2018). Despite ESPN’s efforts, a mutual buyout between the two was agreed upon in September 2018. Since Hill left ESPN, she has been involved in many projects, including writing for “The Atlantic.” The editor-in-chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, thought that the idea of sports, race, and politics weaved together was

critical in America and loved that Hill was at the heart of it. Asked about the difference between Hill's days at ESPN versus her future with The Atlantic, Goldberg responded accordingly:

Put it this way, my journalistic interests are somewhat different than Disney's. Let me be diplomatic. I'm not sure that, as a consumer of ESPN products, I'm not sure that ESPN is particularly interested, especially in television, in standing at the intersection of sports and culture and race and gender and politics. It can be a pretty dangerous corner for some people. But that's exactly the intersection that I want to be at (Miller, 2018).

Goldberg echoes the claim that ESPN's primary institutional preference is to "stick to sports." Yet, ESPN continues to institutionally sideline the synthesis of sports, culture, race, gender, class, and politics. Rowe (2003) states that sport occupies a "prominent position within culture," while McChesney (1989) emphasizes that, "sport emerges as an institution especially well suited culturally and ideologically, first, to the emerging industrial capitalism of the century, and, second--and indeed far more so--to the mature corporate capitalist society of the twentieth century" (p. 50). Hill, herself, believes "sports have this unique ability to bring in issues of gender, race, and culture" (Brickman, 2019). Le Batard's rupture underscored ESPN's discourse on neutrality, and how they strategically employ the discourse of "sticking to sports" more broadly to discipline audiences and push back against politicization despite popular culture and sports specifically representing potential sites of struggle.

In our evaluation, Kaepernick's protest, combined with Le Batard and Hill's presidential attacks, serve as landmark catalysts for the articulation of the "stick to sports" discourse. The "stick to sports" discourse corresponds to a normalizing Foucauldian formation of institutional

knowledge and power (Havens et al., 2009). ESPN utilizes this discourse to enact authority. “Stick to sports” is the spoken and unspoken hegemonic boundary that ESPN places on its employees. ESPN has likewise acquiesced to fans and political voices who want to neuter attempts by players, coaches, and media figures to make sports a site for deliberating over social issues. Stick to sports is a euphemism for “not speaking truth to power” (GMG Union, 2019), but also a protection of revenue. ESPN and other sports media industries are insulating their brands through a politics of apolitical posturing and cautioning employees to think twice before traversing that boundary.

“Stick to Sports”: To Honor or Scorn?

Throughout the rest of the thesis, we analyze different tactics and practices of “stick to sports” to determine the scope of the discourse along with its limitations through the critical media industry studies lens (Havens et al., 2009). We’ve charted a brief history, attempting to pinpoint some of the origins of this discourse. In our efforts, we found that the Olympics were among the first to sanitize politics out of its global event (Boykoff, 2017). Although the Olympics remain a venue where protests have increased, the “stick to sports” discourse has strived to mitigate and sanitize substantive dissent.

Next, we examined the role of athlete activism. While we expounded on several cases of athlete activists, Colin Kaepernick is a centerpiece and lightning rod. His protest emboldened fans to contradictorily speak out to silence Kaepernick for being Anti-American--telling him to “stick to sports” rather than advocate for social justice (Pena, 2017). Fans learned how to wield

the loaded discourse and weaponize its accompanying political entanglements. Lastly, we followed the “stick to sports” relationship with ESPN as an institution and some of ESPN’s most significant employees, Dan Le Batard and Jemele Hill. Both challenged the “stick to sports” discourse leading to separate disciplinary actions. ESPN sheltered its brand but also flexed the company’s authority over employees through a policy of neutrality and the institutional sedimented practice of sticking to sports.

Chp. 2 - ESPN's "First Take"

Although ESPN's initial focus revolved around "stick to sports," they launched ESPN Original Entertainment (EOE) in 2001 to capitalize on popular media genres' potential to attract 'casual fans' (Vogan, 2015). EOE's purpose was to combine elements like music, fashion, entertainment, and sports altogether (p. 97). Within the new system birthed many programs. Some of them short-lived, including EOE's first production "2-Minute Drill (2001)," "Mohr Sports (2005)," and "ESPN Hollywood (2002)," while others still run today (Pardon The Interruption, Around The Horn, and First Take). While many welcomed the new sports system, some were skeptical that ESPN would lose its sports edge. For example, Sports Illustrated's Chris Ballard said, "ESPN should stick to sports for the same reason that CNBC shouldn't make an Alan Greenspan biopic..." (p. 97). ESPN Senior Vice President of Programming, Len Deluca, claimed that EOE was created to place the "Entertainment" back into ESPN.

This chapter will evaluate ESPN's 16-year-old show, "First Take," as an articulation of the "stick to sports" discourse within the design and format of its programming. An extensive dive behind the show's structure will be featured, looking at the relationship with the audience, and flaws it faces internally as it invokes the discourse of sticking to sports. The show excels at differentiating sports and politics, otherwise viewing sports as inherently political, creating a form of neutrality. Part of the "stick to sports" discourse is its gendered hypermasculinity. Research has shown that sports have long operated within popular culture as the purview of masculinity (Hardin & Greer, 2009). "First Take" builds on this gender domination by putting men over women. The two men on the show, Stephen A. Smith and Max Kellerman, command the "talking time" over Molly Qerim, the moderator.

Background of “First Take” and its Figures

“First Take” originally started in 2003, under the name “Cold Pizza,” and was ESPN’s attempt at a sports-world version of “Good Morning America” (Cunningham, 2018). The show has gone through its share of hosts, co-hosts, moderators, and even the structure has shifted. In 2011, ESPN saw its ratings spike during the show’s debate formats, and the other features were dropped, resulting in two hours of debating (Cunningham, 2018). After Woody Paige’s departure, Stephen A. Smith, who would serve as a ‘fill-in,’ became a full-time host alongside Skip Bayless in 2012. Bayless left ESPN in 2016, signing a contract with the rival station, Fox Sports 1, where he was paired with former NFL Tight End, Shannon Sharpe. Meanwhile, Max Kellerman was Bayless’s replacement on “First Take.” The show has also shuffled through several moderators leading up to Molly Qerim (“First Take,” 2019).

Stephen A. Smith

Smith began his career covering homicide with the Winston-Salem Chronicle, Winston-Salem Journal, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and the New York Daily News (Cunningham, 2018). In high school he began as a sportswriter, and then ventured out to the Philadelphia Inquirer, covering high school, college, and professional sports, earning the sports columnist title (Cunningham, 2018). He became so successful that during the NBA lockout in the 1998-1999 season, people were wanting him to appear on TV because no one had information. He appeared on CNN, Sports Illustrated, leading to his NBA analyst position, continued to Fox Sports, and

then finally, ESPN (Cunningham, 2018). Smith had climbed the ranks to becoming a columnist, radio host, and TV host; and has been a regular host on “First Take” since 2012.

Max Kellerman

Max Kellerman specializes in boxing, which is where his broadcasting career started. He had a show called “Max on Boxing,” that never took off, but was resurrected in late 2018 with the help of ESPN (“Max Kellerman,” 2019). He graduated from Columbia University in 1998 with a history degree and was later hired as an analyst on ESPN’s boxing series *Friday Night Fights*. Kellerman also was the original host of ESPN’s long-running show “Around the Horn” until he failed to reach a contract extension with ESPN, leaving for Fox Sports Networks in 2004 (“Max Kellerman,” 2019). He transferred back-and-forth between ESPN and Fox Sports, with a pit stop at CNN for a short stint in 2010, weighing in on sports and pop culture issues. Marcellus Wiley, Michele Beadle, and Kellerman hosted ESPN’s fan-forum show “SportsNation” together for three years before Kellerman left for “First Take” in 2016.

Molly Qerim

Molly Qerim is recognizable as the Moderator for ESPN’s “First Take.”. Before “First Take,” she was “the breaking news reporter for *Fantasy Football Now* on ESPN2 where she was honored with an Emmy for her contribution” (“Molly Qerim,” 2019, para. 6). She was born in New Haven, Connecticut, where she attended college at the University of Connecticut, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communications and a minor in Business Administration. Qerim also worked at CBS Sports as a reporter covering events like National Signing Day, the NCAA Tournament, the U.S. Open, the Heisman Trophy Presentation, NBA

Draft, MLB-All Star Game, Super Bowl, and more (“Molly Qerim,” 2019). She began her stint as “First Take’s” moderator in July of 2015, initially temporarily, but was soon promoted to the permanent position.

Womanizing History Affecting “Stick to Sports”

“Lisa Olson Incident”

ESPN has dealt with its share of sexual litigations, ranging from former players to SportsCenter anchors on the network. In any profession, women battle sexual abuse and with social media’s prominence, that abuse has intensified (Jane, 2014). Women have made headway by forging new pathways to assert themselves in a formulaic sports industry. Research has shown that gender roles mirror societal norms (Birrell, 1988; Hardin & Greer, 2009). While women are instructed to stick to the sideline, Lisa Olson advanced the narrative further. She was a sportswriter for the Boston Herald, back in the 1990s, and was given access to the New England Patriots locker room to handle interviews. Her job as a sportswriter couldn’t be completed without being subjected to harassment (Kane & Disch, 1993).

Players solicited sexual gestures towards her and yelled out tawdry remarks (p. 332). Additionally, she was shown contempt by management and fans asking her to flash her breasts, called a “classic bitch,” exposed to death threats, and letters containing obscene sexual references (p. 332). These deplorable acts led to a national debate regarding the presence of females in men’s locker rooms. Mary Kane and Lisa Disch (1993) research institutes two interpretive frameworks of (a) Olson’s character and (b) system regulating “appropriate”

behavior (p. 340). Her journalism morals and credentials were questioned as she was labeled a “hysterical female” unwilling to “accept a joke” and a “rape victim” getting what she deserved because she trespassed into “forbidden territory” (p. 341).

“Stick to Sports,” Gendered Performance and Online Abuse

“First Take” struggles with gendered hypermasculinity. They tailor programming to men’s sports, primarily mainstream men’s sports, such as basketball and football. About two-thirds of men, between ages 18-34, consume about an hour of ESPN content a day (Feiler, 2011). Sandvoss’s (2005) definition of fandom describes it as the “regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text” (p. 8). Young men are taught through sports programming the values of “manliness” in what Michael Messner (2000) calls the “televised sports manhood formula.” First Take’s structure reflects many societal norms with male misogynistic perspectives, racial barriers, all within a political framework. Sports debate is seen “as a male space in which masculinity is measured by the intensity of one’s argument rather than the validity of one’s point” (Henry & Oates, 2019). “First Take” models facile, blustering debates rather than substantive dives into deeper issues that connect sports with politics and limits the possibilities for future debates. This is, in turn, modeled by predominantly male audiences in everyday life. This further emphasizes the larger “stick to sports” discourse as a privileged mode of sports talk, devoid of the political.

Molly Qerim encounters plenty of pushback and even verbal abuse from fans when attempting to chime in on topics. “First Take” is partially at fault because they fail to include her

in debate segments. By doing this, they are silencing Qerim's contributions to the show, circulating the message of censorship. The audience is then aware that she isn't a debater or main character, not a focal point of the show, so when she does sound off, it sets them off. On "First Take's" YouTube page, there are many repulsive comments hurled at Qerim. Most of them refer to Qerim letting Smith and Kellerman do the debating with some suggesting that she needs to "shut the f--- up," or a simple reminder that "it's not her job to speak" (Garofalo, 2016). In this context, sticking to sports means letting the men talk.

Even though "First Take" supports Qerim's contribution to the show (Garofalo, 2016), her role as moderator structures and limits her speech. Many comments that include Qerim are intrusive and offensive, whether sexual or out of annoyance. Women have faced an upward battle over what they can or cannot be on television (D'Acci, 2000). Azy Barak (2005) finds that online harassment towards women is meant to silence and humiliate those who try to enter male-dominated spaces. Considering that Qerim isn't necessarily part of the debate due to the format of the show, it leads fans to question ESPN's motive to keep her as the moderator. The sports network overtly and inadvertently promotes her as a "pretty face" accentuating her sexuality over her sports knowledge.

Gary Whannel (1992) writes, "to be in sport poses a threat to femininity, and to be feminine poses a problem for sporting activity" (p. 119). Albeit, if they are too feminine, they risk being sexualized and trivialized, too masculine, and they risk being demonized (Allison, 2018). Michela Musto, Cheryl Cooky, and Michael Messner (2015) have pointed to other scholars to identify a couple of reasons why "sport is used as an empirical window into normalizing forms of gender inequality. First, televised sports news and highlight shows operate as part of a mega-billion-dollar institutionalized sports-media complex that has valued the

supposed bodily superiority of men over women (Jhally, 1984). Second is that sex segregation in sport is both legally enforced and culturally accepted. And finally, contesting men's dominance has been difficult within institutions such as sport, military, and blue-collar workplaces, where high value is placed on large body size, physical strength, aggression or violence (Charles & Grusky, 2005; Connell, 2009)" (pp. 574-575). Elizabeth Taylor, Allison Smith, Cheryl Rode, and Robin Hardin (2017) describe this as a "situation in which the person with less authority harasses another person that possesses greater authority," which can range from incivility, bullying, sexual, or violence (p. 62). In other words, what Azy Barak (2005) would call, "active verbal sexual harassment." These are offensive sexual messages including gender-humiliating comments, sexual remarks, dirty jokes, and more (pgs. 78-79). Fans engage in vulgar verbal abuse to degrade Qerim hoping to dissuade her from returning to work. In this way, they'll make comments alluding to her body or celebrate her absence (if another moderator substitutes).

Molly Qerim is certainly sexualized. Barak demonstrates that "active verbal sexual harassment" can be found, most commonly, in chat rooms or forums; but can seep into porn sites, sex-shops, and sexual-related medical matters (p. 79). Fans are constantly reminding Qerim of their hegemonic masculinity and to "stick to her job." When Molly Qerim transcends the normal role of a moderator by being outspoken, fans direct their exasperation through offensive comments. These actions exasperate the gender inequality within organizations (Rosependa, Richman, & Nawyn, 1998). While fans are aware of their despicable comments, subconsciously, they are emphasizing a message sent by the organization. Albert Bandura writes, "Most of the behaviors that people display are learned, either deliberately or inadvertently, through the influence of example" (p. 3). It isn't fair to completely blame ESPN for the abuse that Qerim receives online but ESPN exploits her for their gain. Relationship marketing (Ravald &

Gronroos, 1996) in sports has strengthened with consumers thanks to social media, but it has also opened a dangerous portal of criticism and abuse towards employees and specifically women. Molly Qerim characterizes the persona of a mother disciplining her children. Qerim supervises both Smith and Kellerman, while they quarrel in conversation, before empowering herself between them to give them a chance to recharge. Her role, as moderator, affirms the “stick to sports” discourse. ESPN places Qerim as the babysitter to monitor Smith and Kellerman.

“Stick to Sports” Enactment

It’s fair to question Qerim’s contribution to “First Take” other than being a stage prop and punching bag. She is regularly muted when participating in the debate segments, often jeered at when she does by the studio audience. However, Qerim’s contributions on the show stretches far beyond an unwanted talking head. We argue that she is the “stick to sports” interlocutor. She illustrates this by enforcing the discourse whenever someone drifts off-topic or stays into political, controversial territory. It’s Qerim’s job to confine them, circling the conversation back to “pure sports.”

We’ll showcase some examples to see how “stick to sports” is handled on the show. In Julie D’Acci’s (2000) research of “Cagney & Lacey,” she explored the contentious relationship between women and television. More precisely, their spot inside the TV realm (p. 10). “Stick to sports” entraps Qerim, obstructing her assistance. The moderator role represses the ability to uniformly contribute. Consequently, when Qerim violates her duties, this causes both fans and colleagues to utter dissatisfaction, which is sometimes glaring on the show. One occasion

happened on December 18, 2018 when the “First Take” crew was bickering over the New Orleans Saints struggles. Stephen A. Smith was arguing that the city’s nightlife could be a distraction for players. Qerim interposed suggesting that any city could be tempting, naming Boston as an example. This led to Smith sarcastically asking her, “There’s no difference between New Orleans and Foxborough?” (“Stephen A. Smith Calls Out Molly”). It made her seem naive as she was fumbling for a response, further rationalizing to the audience why she shouldn’t be apart of the conversations.

Next, is how “stick to sports” fences out culture. “First Take” is designed to discuss the biggest debate stories happening around the sports industry. The NBA’s preseason became turbulent once Houston Rockets General Manager, Daryl Morey, tweeted his support for the protesters in Hong Kong. We will further assess the imprint it had on the NBA along with the fallout in chapter four, but our current intention is to analyze “First Take’s” specific role. The show debated over the Commissioner’s defiant attitude about refusing to apologize to China. The segment was wrapping up before Stephen A. Smith added a little too much critical insight. He veered away from sports entirely to acknowledge the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Haisley, 2019). He couldn’t elaborate on his thought because an eager Molly Qerim was quick to interject with a commercial break. Now whether she was told by a producer or it was self-generated is unclear, but it’s visible to see that she possesses the power to corral her male comrades to “stick to sports” and affirms her obligation to affirm the values of ESPN as a neutral institution.

“Embrace Debate”

Along with the racial dialogue associated with Smith and Kellerman, their speech patterns are how the discourse is expressed. Smith depicts habits of a Black urban oral tradition (p. 165), while Kellerman associates with a class of whiteness. Henry and Oates (2019) write, “The program’s portrayal of Black and White panelists engaging in heated debate not only courts both implicit and explicit racial tension and packages that tension to viewers but also contains it solely to discussion of sports” (p. 166). Therefore, race and politics are intertwined within the “stick to sports” discourse without disrupting it. Ironically, “First Take’s” model promotes rambunctious debates that overlook the complexities between sports and politics. Therefore indicating, as we noted earlier, the discourse as a privileged mode of sports talk, devoid of the political. Henry and Oates (2019) also mention that race is normally absent in sports media, but consolidated on “First Take” through both the panelists as well as the topics being discussed (p. 166).

The premise of the show orbits around ‘outrage discourse’ which entails “efforts to provoke visceral responses from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and partial truths about opponents” (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). The polarization demonstrated between Smith and Kellerman reinforces the “stick to sports” discourse through argument. Both the dialogue and structure resemble a democratic debate. ESPN’s “First Take” unequivocally blends sports with politics but obscures it as sports talk. As such, Henry and Oates (2019), explain that the topics on “First Take” reflect ESPN’s desire to control the sports narrative to concentrate on “polarizing, yet popular, topics” (p. 168). Thus, “First Take” serves as an articulation of the “stick to sports” discourse because ESPN addresses non-sport related areas, but grounds it in sport, never diverging into critical reflection of power dynamics.

“Stick to Sports” Poster-Child

“First Take” offers a template for “sticking to sports” through its purposeful apolitical dialogue. It pivots away from pure politics, only blending itself with sport politics (Brady, 2017). With Molly Qerim acting as the discourse’s chaperone, the show sculpts ESPN’s desires of political speech on the network. Henry and Oates (2019) argues that “First Take” avoids broader controversies neighboring sports by appealing to ‘staged outrage’ in trivial matters within sports (p. 166). Therefore, the discourse is stabilized through the show’s format. “Stick to sports” is depicted through Smith and Kellerman’s speech patterns. “First Take” flirts with contentious subjects by engaging in combative arguments encircling sports.

This speech arrangement of ‘staged outrage’ enables the discourse to operate exceptionally well. It provides ESPN with a palette of “stick to sports” performance. “First Take” correctly exercises the discourse through its structure. The network is aware that overstepping the boundaries of sports is fatal. So, with that in mind, “First Take” becomes the archetype for what gets included and excluded, what is visible and invisible, in sports talk. ESPN uses the flagship show to symbolically structure apoliticism across its many shows and the entire ESPN sports apparatus of journalism, podcasts, and content. ESPN is advising its encompassing programs to model “First Take.” After the Dan Le Batard scandal, the network wants to retain its reputation as an apolitical workplace. If other ESPN shows trespass into political territory, the network is compelled to send out a “stick to sports” mandate, but with “First Take,” it’s normalized and embedded within the show itself.

Chp. 3 – The Politicization of Sport

The politicization of sport has existed for centuries. Sports have helped shape societal values for multiple cultures, including the Mayans, Medieval kings, among others (McCleary, 2019). Unfortunately, ESPN has received a great deal of criticism for integrating politics into its coverage. Sports journalist and media personality Clay Travis has been a staunch critic of ESPN, vocalizing his dissatisfaction with the purported political direction of the network. In this chapter, Travis’s video, *Politics and Sports: Keep Your Hands Off My Football*, will be analyzed to review how he challenges the network’s lack of commitment to “stick to sports.”

Alongside this, we’ll unpack how the NBA/China debacle caused Travis to switch activist voices and roles. The Hong Kong protest impinged the relationship with the NBA by placing several players and coaches at the helm. The response from the NBA incentivized remaining neutral by quelling player responses, while also banning any political signs inside arenas from fans. ESPN also muzzled their media talent from sounding off about the matter, repudiating their former stance of activism about “sports talk” and “politics.” Meanwhile, Clay Travis opportunistically challenges sports figures to “stand up and talk,” rather than “shut up and dribble,” switching positions with activist voices. These hypocritical messages and contradictions show the precariousness of sticking to sports.

“Keep Your Hands Off My Football”

Fox Sports’ Clay Travis released a video on November 26, 2018, titled “Politics and Sports: Keep Your Hands Off My Football” on PragerU.com. PragerU is an “American non-profit organization featuring videos of various political, economic, and philosophical topics from

an American conservative perspective” (“PragerU,” 2020). Travis’s video entailed him ranting about how the politicization of sports has grown blaming ESPN as the reason why. His criticism ranged from ESPN transforming from a 24/7 sports network to a liberal company by replacing “ratings bonuses” with “diversity bonuses” and granting “woke analysts” consisting of Jemele Hill, Max Kellerman, and Bomani Jones their own shows (Travis, 2018).

The failure of “stick to sports” is detailed by Travis’s condemnation of ESPN for their inclusion of Colin Kaepernick’s protest rather than the game of “football” itself. He faults them for contaminating the market by influencing smaller sports journalism sites such as USA Today, Yahoo Sports, and Sports Illustrated. Thanks to ESPN, Travis states that on those networks named above that, “You’re as likely to read about players’ thoughts on the President, as you are about their thoughts on the game” (Travis, 2018). He is desperately clamoring for ESPN to “stick to sports,” further materializing the discourse. Travis notes that the network has fractured the “unifying power” of sports through its dose of politics. He claims that ESPN added politics because they “realized it was losing its clout” (Travis, 2018).

Travis belittles sports journalists’ capability of “sticking to sports.” He believes that (a) “they’re afraid of being called racist or sexist,” (b) “they want to be friends with the athletes,” (c) “they want to think of themselves as ‘serious’ journalists,” (d) “they come from the same journalism schools as the political reporters,” and (e) “they’re overwhelmingly on the left” (Travis, 2018). He pronounces that ESPN has been consistently losing subscribers since 2011, supporting that political talk impedes viewership. Travis pleads about sports’ importance in America--how we need “that break from our everyday cares,” “its unique ability to unite our community, our nation,” and “the civics lesson” (Travis, 2018). Travis is policing ESPN, along

with the rest of the sports media, by emphasizing that sports are too essential to be “poisoned” with politics.

Henry and Oates (2019) expound on how sport television acts as a site where people, political affiliations aside, can unify around sports (p. 171). Even though Travis is advocating that politics are maiming sports, he still acknowledges the importance of the National Anthem, saying, “We begin every sports united” (Travis, 2018). Travis is alright with militaristic rituals of community and patriotism but continues to bash ESPN for politicizing sports (Butterworth, 2012; Rugg, 2016). Despite Travis harping on ESPN to purify its network, Jimmy Pitaro has been actively working towards removing “pure politics” from the network. He stressed in 2018, ESPN was trying to “redefine itself against a false narrative that it was pursuing sports coverage from a liberal political angle” (Henry & Oates, 2019). Pitaro believed employees were confused about the network’s expectations under previous leadership, but are now perceptive (Flood, 2019). Travis (2018) used the phrase “woke analysts” to belittle several outspoken journalists ESPN allotted more screen time. Figures like Jemele Hill and Michelle Beadle were too dubious for the network, always on a slippery slope with polarizing headlines, leading to them being released (Miller, 2018; Marchand, 2019).

The Politicization of Sport

Travis poses the question of “when did sports become so political?” to open his monologue. However, sports have always intermingled with politics, as Andrew Strenk (1979) writes, “sports are politics” (p. 129). We earlier identified how the Olympics were a combative venue, which encouraged politics (Boykoff, 2017). The Olympics even fit within a sports-political regime with an effect on countries’ sports policies (Grix, 2013). Sports and politics have

coexisted, yet Travis limits this history by claiming the history of politics and sports began with the “Worldwide Leader in Sports” (Travis, 2018).

Travis is speaking more from a consumer/fan perspective, asking for a divorce between the two. Although there is evidence that suggests that people gravitate towards ESPN to escape politics (Kinkead, 2019), Gates (2013) detects sport as an instrument of soft power with four mechanisms: (1) image-building, (2) dialogue, (3) trust-building, and (4) reconciliation (pp. 238-240). Using those mechanisms, Pitaro has attempted to rebrand ESPN under a “stick to sports” umbrella. Travis omits Pitaro’s adjustments and blasts the network for transforming into a left-leaning MSNBC (Travis, 2018). He underlines that ESPN’s lack of sports has tarnished their image.

The claims that Travis makes about ESPN igniting the political realm are irrational. The reality is that sports are politicized, and politics are athleticized (Lipsky, 1979). Whether it’s the encouragement of sports teams to visit the White House in celebration of their championship, or the president’s candid involvement with sports (Neumann, 2016). The bottom line is that the two are linked, but Travis (2018) somehow overlooks that and instead, spends five minutes bashing the network with deceptive statistics.

ESPN isn’t perceived as a site that creates sophisticated or artful products, despite its ubiquity (Vogan, 2012). There’s a perception by outsiders that the network is inadequate in its journalistic integrity, spending an extensive amount of time on the scandals circling sports rather than on the event (p. 138). Travis expresses this by denoting the political temptation of ESPN, by the selected analysts, anthem protest reporting, and motivation for weaving sports and politics together (Travis, 2018). Travis loathes ESPN’s actions to neglect sport, which he views as the rationale for their existence.

Up to this point, Travis has excoriated the prowess of ESPN's hiring tactics, its struggle to remain within the spectrum of sport, and how that relationship inspired others to imitate them. Thanks to ESPN's attained success, they've ascended to become a top-tier sports network, truly earning the "Worldwide Leader in Sports" tagline. Travis uses this achievement against the network, demanding that the company maximize "sports" and diminish politics. Thus, using the discourse to generate what Sally Riad (2005) calls "organizational culture." This culture is regulated by discursive practices and disciplinary techniques (p. 1532). Travis calls on ESPN to set "stick to sports" as a precedent.

NBA/China Rupture

The Hong Kong protests placed the National Basketball Association (NBA) into an uncomfortable position. On October 4, 2019, Houston Rockets General Manager, Daryl Morey promoted a tweet in support of the protest, resulting in China halting cooperation with the team (Perper, 2019). The Rockets' Owner, Tilman Fertitta, and the NBA moved swiftly into damage control to protect their potential entry into the Chinese market and extend their global reach. The NBA called the tweet "regrettable" and apologized for "deeply offending" Chinese fans (Lane, 2019). Several Chinese businesses and sponsors of the Rockets suspended their deals and collaborations (Tensley, 2019). These actions led to a firestorm where political affiliates, as well as fans, denigrated the NBA for protecting its brand rather than human rights (Brzeski, 2019).

The NBA was in the middle of a political fiasco, doing everything it could to flee from it. Both players and coaches were involuntarily thrust into the thick of a public relations dilemma, delicately trying to remain neutral. Many wanted to distance themselves away from the scandal by remaining silent to protect their brands (Lovelace Jr., 2019). Stephen Curry and Steve Kerr

stressed their lack of knowledge about the protests, while Houston Rockets star James Harden offered his apologies expressing “We love China” (Felt, 2019; Rodrigo, 2019). LeBron James, on the other hand, didn’t shy away from publicly discussing his opinion with the world (Saracevic, 2019). About Rockets GM Morey’s tweet, James said that he was “misinformed” and “uneducated” and that Morey “didn’t think about the ramifications” (Saracevic, 2019). Akin to the NBA, James’s comments were read as “naïve” by placing revenue over human rights, especially when James has been an outspoken activist over police brutality in the United States. James and his Miami Heat teammates wore hoodies in solidarity over the killing of Trayvon Martin. But in this context, James wouldn’t join in the protest of the Chinese government treatment of the Uighur Muslim people. James' comments didn’t sit well with the masses leading to endorsement losses (Silverman, 2019).

Cunningham and Regan Jr. (2012) share three reasons why athletes refuse to engage in politics: (1) societal restrictions, (2) occupational pressures, and (3) reputational destruction (p. 2). Besides comments from Curry and James, most agents encouraged their clients to withdraw themselves from the China kerfuffle (Young, 2019). Otherwise, motivating them to “stick to sports.” Players and coaches detaching from the controversy stifles their ability to speak out on other social issues. Besides that, the players’ neutrality favored the NBA and their respective economic futures in the league by kowtowing to China.

Neutralizing the Field

Between the U.S. and China, the NBA struggled to appease one side without alienating the other (Beer, 2019). The league has been lauded in the past for allowing players to speak freely about political issues (Minsberg, 2018), as long as it doesn’t interfere with business relationships

(Hill, 2019). The league supports transparency with Sopan Deb, New York Times Cultural Reporter, explaining that the NBA brands itself as the “League Encouraging Political Activism” (Tensley, 2019). Although in this instance, that mindset was discarded. The NBA was doing its best to smooth over its ties with China following the fallout from Morey’s tweet. The league sacrificed Morey’s freedom for their dividends by divorcing his tweet from the representation of the NBA (Smith, 2019). They wanted to retain a healthy basketball relationship, shielding themselves by “sticking to sports” instead of dealing with the gritty minutiae of human rights entanglements. In doing so, they modified their standards and values to cater to China.

Houston Rockets Owner, Tim Fertitta considered removing Morey at his position as General Manager in favor of alleviating the mishap and rebuilding Chinese business interests (Gonzalez, 2019). Initially, the NBA demonized Morey but then tried also to appear to respect his right to freedom of speech (Connolly, 2019). Despite the pivot, “stick to sports” broadened from an organizational tactic to the global geopolitical stage. Fans at games in China were ejected for showing support for the Hong Kong protests through cardboard signs and political messages (Baer, 2019). Many of these live-streamed videos circulated on social media. It was apparent that the Chinese government and the NBA were determined to nuke anything related to the “Daryl Morey Controversy” by confiscating physical messages and burying the visibility of the story in the media. The NBA, through arena staff, asking for basketball-related signs from fans to be confiscated, is tangible evidence of an institutional strategy to “stick to sports.”

ESPN’s “Stick to Sports” Memo

Due to the political connotations tied to NBA/China ordeal, ESPN decided to release a memo to employees on how to cover the story. The memo instructed employees to avoid

discussion of the protest solely, but rather settle on basketball-related issues (Wagner, 2019). It strongly resembles their “No-Politics” policy, which pushes the same neutral message of “stick to sports.” Borrowing from the NBA’s approach, ESPN suppressed deliberation over the core issues in the Hong Kong and Uighur’s protest and, instead, restricting any discussions to fit within the guidelines they represent. ESPN furnishing a memo with clear instructions to “stick to sports” fortifies the importance of the discourse and sets a standard that dissuades from taking part in future political speech.

From “Shut Up & Dribble” to “Stand Up & Talk”

Clay Travis, who previously urged the segregation of sports and politics, now switched perspectives after the China scandal. He believes that the league shouldn’t apologize for promoting democracy, and their decision to ignore China’s abuse of human rights catered to the “wrong side of history” (Travis, 2019). His pious remarks discredit his earlier criticisms in his PragerU video. His stance transformed from reprimanding ESPN’s progressive activism to demanding that American sports figures advocate and adopt pro-democracy stances around the world. Travis is deeming that the league is only cognizant about activism when it’s financially beneficial (Travis, 2019).

What about Travis’s earlier fears about the unification of sports with the injection of politics? He originally proclaimed that “the unifying power of sports was trashed by the sports media” (Travis, 2018). ESPN’s fusing of sports and politics left Travis hopeless for sports media--now he’s persuading that same media infrastructure to fight for justice and the spread of American democracy worldwide. Travis’s opposing stances made him switch activists’ voices from “shut up and dribble,” to “stand up and talk.” The NBA’s handling in China isn’t being

praised, but the sudden indignation of Travis's reaction belies his initial statements. We're not throwing shade at Travis for standing up for human rights, but we are interested in his motivation for this new posture. Travis initially emphasized that sports aren't the venue to discuss political issues, but now is using sports as the full-throated vehicle to drive home his views.

Dont We Already “Stick to Sports”

In this chapter, we've witnessed the development of the discourse through articulation, manifestation, and subversion. Clay Travis rallied for the sports industry to “stick to sports” for the sake of its fans and brand. ESPN was Travis's adversary in his video, “Politics and Sports: Keep Your Hands Off My Football” exposing them for melding politics and sports talk. Next, “stick to sports” was fiercely enacted throughout the industry to cover for the NBA. The NBA undermined its players, coaches, and earlier advocacy projects to rectify a business relationship, while ESPN doubled down on coaching their employees to “stick to sports.”

“Stick to sports” is legitimized as a concept that is global and geopolitical. Lastly, these apolitical viewpoints can become subverted. Clay Travis switched perspectives shifting from an apolitical sports environment to politicizing the field. Hence, “stick to sports” becomes ideologically malleable.

Chp. 4 – Deadspin’s Demise

To reiterate, “‘Stick to sports’ is and always has been a thinly veiled euphemism for ‘don’t speak truth to power’” (GMG Union, 2019). This quote was in support of the myriad of employees that quit at the sports blog site, Deadspin. The company dissolved from failing to “stick to sports.” So far, that discourse has employed itself as a power of retribution and domination in the professional sphere. This chapter will appraise the deterioration of Deadspin, assessing the “stick to sports” role within it. Many factors led to the demise of the company, but it all centered around this discourse. Similar to ESPN, a mandate from ownership briefed the staff on the need to fixate on sports at the expense of providing commentary on popular culture and politics. The company, however, refused this directive and oddly died, like their name implies, from dead spin. Using Deadspin as a case study helps us understand how the discourse was not only named and recognized as a tool to enforce the politics of neutrality but could be used by employees to push against institutional power. In the previous chapters, this concept was largely unspoken, whereas Deadspin endured it head-on as an institutional tactic to reform one of the most outspoken sports journalism sites on the internet. The furtherance of this discourse will provide insight into the future of “stick to sports.”

Sticky Sports

The discourse of “stick to sports” has penetrated inside the sports media industry to preserve profits and relevance, but how did it demolish a company? It began when a directive from the parent company of Deadspin (G/O Media) was sent begging employees to quit writing

non-sports stories (Bennett & Hipes, 2019). This action was ignored, leading to the firing of the acting editor-in-chief, Barry Petchesky. Unwittingly, it would ignite an onslaught of voluntary layoffs. About 20 Deadspin staff members supported Petchesky by departing the company (Strauss, 2019). Deadspin is among various websites, part of G/O Media and the Gizmodo Media Group (GMG). The GMG Union tweeted a statement condemning CEO Jim Spanfeller, who was installed as the CEO by the private equity firm that bought the company seven months before Petchesky's firing, for sabotaging editorial independence (Strauss, 2019).

Paul Maidment, the Editorial Director of G/O Media, orchestrated the failed “stick to sports” mandate passed down to Deadspin (Bayliss, 2019). Less than a week later, Maidment relieved himself from his duties citing it was the appropriate time to leave (Spangler, 2019). Until this point, the discourse had been deployed to enforce neutrality and curtail the politics of employees, but in this instance, “stick to sports” was used to push back against the parent company.

Deadspin built status in the sports journalism ecosystem by branding itself as a “sports-culture” site, which was being polluted by the new leadership (Walsh, 2019). Burroughs and Vogan (2015) show how media industries like Deadspin “fashion their brands, critique competitors, and compete for market share” (p. 87). Eldridge (2019) found that Deadspin's work from “journalism's periphery” contributes to “the work of the journalistic core.” As CEO, Spanfeller scorned the cultural elements the site was built around, injecting a more “stick to sports” method (Petchesky, 2019). The discourse infuriated employees, causing them to leave without hesitation. They declined to let their editorial independence become crippled, leaving the corporation stranded.

Sadly, for Deadspin, the company that existed as an unruly, critical voice, ultimately waned. An ample number of representatives for Deadspin sacrificed their salaries and passion so they could endorse a more significant statement. Deadspin imploded because the employee's journalistic ethics were being restrained. Policies became stricter once Great Hill Partners acquired them, with many believing that these policies derailed the company from robust journalism (Walsh, 2019). Megan Greenwell, former EIC, elucidated Deadspin's "broad editorial scope" as a successful part of Deadspin's brand and approach to sports journalism to Spanfeller and Maidment (Walsh, 2019). Despite numerous attempts by employees to alter the directive, Spanfeller possessed a distinct desire for the company: "stick to sports." Employees, however, deviated from his directives, leaving a fight for editorial independence. Deadspin has been revitalized under new management, hiring new writers that perform within the "stick to sports" guidelines (Peters, 2020). Their motto has shifted from "Sports News Without Access, Favor, or Discretion" to "Sports News Without Fear, Favor, or Compromise" (para. 4).

As Petchesky (2019) explained in an editorial to the New York Times after his firing:

In recent years, we've seen the deaths (and to varying degrees, the troubled rebirths) of the likes of Newsweek, The Denver Post, LA Weekly, Playboy and just last month, the granddaddy of all sports media, Sports Illustrated. It plays out the same way each time: The new owners come in, slash staff and costs and turn a once-proud publication into a content mill churning out bland and unimportant stories that no one wants or needs to read (para. 9).

The corporate tactic of enforcing neutrality to maximize profit margins has a tangible impact on sports journalism and the kind of voices that are allowed to speak. Petchesky is saying that

sticking to sports results in milquetoast sports reporting, which inevitably lacks a critical reflexivity to tackle controversial and challenging topics. The weaponizing of “stick to sports” as a corporate strategy, now ricocheted off of Deadspin. Before this, the discourse was persuasive in silencing and alarming sports journalists. Deadspin’s journalists, on the other hand, refused to be marginalized, expressing that through abrupt resignations. The result left Deadspin in shambles, forcing G/O Media’s hand to reboot the site. Deadspin originally blossomed from its diversified range of topics, defining itself as a “sports and social commentary” site (“Deadspin,” 2020).

G/O Media and ESPN, for that matter, have been faulted for assuming that “stick to sports” is a broad approach that can cater to a mass audience (Thomas, 2019). Deadspin was terminated due to its defiance to cater to the discourse. In this thesis, it has been evident that individual employees are disciplined for failing to “stick to sports” but never has an entire organization faltered because of it. Often the discourse has been interpreted as being invincible and indisputable, but its deployment is uneven.

Sports vs. Cultural Dilemma

“Stick to sports” equals “Don’t speak truth to power” (GMG Union, 2019). “Stick to sports” is leveraged for compensation and manipulation. The definition is lost in translation because the intent isn’t about sports at all. To sports networks, “sports” are valuable leading the discourse to be used as coercion. Therefore, the definition is crystallized in its deceptive

wording. To the public eye, it is a reinforcement tool, but internally, it is treated as a habitual expression to regain power.

The theory behind “stick to sports” can be traced back to the study of sport history, which heightened during the 1970s (Howard, 2018). For the longest time, the phrase has been applied towards athletes but has amplified to disrupting businesses. The discourse produces a vicious cycle; sports organizations do not tackle critical cultural issues, using “stick to sports” as a justification, and consumers plaster the statement on companies’ social media pages whenever intimidated by too much “culture.” Both groups participate in the marginalization of critical cultural sports talk.

Havens et al. (2009) have explored power through the “structuration theory” in media studies and found that it is never permanently achieved (p. 248). Now that the discourse has been mutually exploited, we concur with the deficiency of power. “Stick to sports” has upheld the power to orchestrate and annihilate a company. Its effect has derailed editorial independence to save proceeds. The discourse placed little importance on “sport” resulting in faulty journalism. Thus, “stick to sports” is an ignorant motto corrupting journalistic integrity for wealth protection.

The capability of the discourse has befuddled corporations in the media industries sphere, from which they cater. “Stick to sports” becomes distorted by detaching the roles of culture, society, and politics. It aims to strengthen sports credibility, but rather it hinders it. Media industries aren’t allowing for comprehensiveness due to the discourse’s barrier. This forces sports corporations to become stagnant and one-dimensional. The rejection of culture may satisfy consumers but will ultimately ravage the journalists, and their work ethic. “Stick to sports” subdues the potential to invest in sports journalism properly because of its condescending nature.

“Stick to Sports” Nomenclature

Scholar Dave Schilling (2017) has suggested the “stick to sports” vanished during Kaepernick’s Anthem Protest and Ty Duffy (2017) has insisted that the discourse’s definition has deviated by writing, “politics have permeated culture completely.” We argue that companies have become oblivious, continuing to malign culture, revolting against the politicization of sport. These companies ignorantly believe that slapping a “stick to sports” directive on a company binds everything together and makes it palatable for a mass audience. Businesses are following a cynical route by belittling employees and publicizing themselves.

The discourse is simple yet complicated in its multitude of nuances. First, it’s an area where athletes are regimented (Smith, 2019). Second, consumers can wield the phrase towards an athlete or business (Huber, 2017). Finally, it is how businesses falsely prosper by textualizing the discourse (Zlotolow, 2019). “Stick to sports” evolution transforms from an aggravating remark to a symbolic gripe. The textualization of the discourse provides both plausibility and accountability. The ascension of the discourse has officially been finalized with the nomenclature. The name empowers it to maneuver through tacit assumptions, which can be further manipulated. Therefore, “stick to sports” is no longer abstract, but grounded in journalistic practices and company policies.

Given its textualization, the discourse is now concrete providing for vast efficacy. That desire is to sanitize sports to become palatable for the masses. As a result, “stick to sports” is calcified within a broader sports culture parallel to society. When considering the maturation of

the discourse, we'd like to take an aesthetic approach (Havens et. al., 2009). The aesthetic angle investigates how particular media text arise from and reshape mid-level industrial practices (p. 237). From the amount of research conducted on athlete activism and social media's role in the sports industry, "stick to sports" has marinated as a straightforward, yet divisive oral language. Borrowing from the aesthetic approach, we can learn more about the naming of "stick to sports" through cultural intermediaries (Maguire & Matthews, 2012). The role of these intermediaries seeks to determine intangible units of legitimacy and desirability (p. 552). Textualizing a phonetic phrase does just that. It grants substance towards the discourse and allows it to be treated earnestly. Contrarily, cultural intermediaries don't legitimize the units (of goods, services, and behaviors) as they see best, but rather are differentiated by locations within (1) commodity chains, (2) professional authority, and (3) framing. (p. 552). "Stick to sports" is dictated appropriately under these preferences. The discourse may thwart editorial independence and journalistic integrity, but it will curve sports journalism towards a common goal of surplus. As we've noticed with Deadspin, this method is risky, regardless of the outcome under the nefarious standards cast onto sports journalists. The textualization of "stick to sports" becomes a command executed in a systematically.

The term "sport" is centralized through the discourse to operate integrally. The internalization of the discourse and its relationship between employees, media texts, and audience interpretations is paramount (Havens et al., 2009). "Stick to sports" embodies every element and is utilized aptly. Again, the discourse uses unfair advantages to accomplish tasks but solidifies itself materially. Now these tasks can fluctuate, positively or negatively, depending on the prescription. If insisted positively, it will attain a sports reputation, boosting compensation. Although, negative consequences can vilify sports journalism.

“Stick to sports” is a ploy used for corrupt journalism and capitalism. The coding of it through mandates and textualization provides a spurious ethos that companies support consumers over laborers. The documentation of “stick to sports” is reactive to consumers. The discourse despises journalistic values to amuse the market. In other words, “stick to sports” endorses unorthodox strategies to achieve tasks. Its durability latches onto cultural intermediaries competency to diversify through devices, routines, measurements to build systems (Latour, 1990; Maguire & Matthews, 2012).

Begone with Journalistic Ethics

“Stick to sports” strips fairness and objectivity from journalists, which pulverizes professionalism. Deadspin’s pushback to the mandate reverberated throughout sports journalism. The company fused the discourse with self-interest. They discounted editorial independence underestimating their own workers’ capability to craft a distinct brand of critical sports journalism. Consider Petchesky’s (2019) view of the role of Deadspin in sports journalism’s critical function:

“We refused to “stick to sports,” because we know that sports is everything, and everything is sports: It’s the N.B.A. kowtowing to its Chinese business interests; it’s pro sports leagues attempting to become shadow justice systems for publicity reasons; it’s the opioid epidemic roiling N.F.L. locker rooms at least as hard as anywhere in Appalachia, even as the league refuses to relax its marijuana policy; it’s racist fan chants chasing black players off the pitch in Italian soccer matches; it’s Washington Nationals catcher

Kurt Suzuki wearing a “Make America Great Again” cap at the White House. (These last two stories occurred in the past week and so were not covered on Deadspin; the “stick to sports” diktat forced the outlet to ignore the biggest sports stories in the world.) (para. 3).”

Sadly, this “stick to sports” approach sapped the company of journalistic integrity and imperiled Deadspin’s longevity.

Michael Ryan (2001) finds that objective journalists not only believe in an authentic world but can express a precise description about it as well (p. 5). Therefore, by the discourse’s imposition, we’ve seen its skill to languish journalists’ passion while leaving much trepidation about the industry’s future. The personalized standard, as formed in cultural intermediaries, relies on subjectivity, whereas professionalism draws closer to standardized qualifications (Maguire & Matthews, 2012; p. 556). This angle justifies journalists’ displeasure with the “stick to sports” directive because it shuns dignity. Journalism is left as an unreliable tool for sincerity and openness. The discourse may preserve the revenue, but it will impair journalism, whether gradually or ferociously.

There is a need to take culture seriously, embracing it entirely. Journalists have the freedom and obligation to propagate substantive content. They do not deserve to be contained, culminating in faulty journalism. Yet, “stick to sports” leaves them dormant, wrangling between choosing fictitious writing or unemployment. The discourse terrorizes occupational security by lowballing journalists. “Stick to sports” perishes journalistic ethics, further distancing itself from sports journalism.

Not So Tough Are Ya?

This chapter has delineated how “stick to sports” neutrality barrier has been crippled. Deadspin rotted because journalists were brave enough to challenge marginalization. This example showcased the culture’s power struggle against “stick to sports” highlighting the discourse’s cachet. We also walked through the process of its jargon and how it continues to ban the politicization of sport. Lastly, “stick to sports” derailed sports journalism, supplanting editorial independence with income. Deadspin jeopardized its relationship with its writers when they slammed an unconventional directive in their face. Although it was an unsatisfactory ending to Deadspin, their demise uncovered the weakness of institutions mandated sports journalism “stick to sports.”

Chp. 5 – Breaking the Mold

Counterproductively, “stick to sports” puts a hindrance on the betterment of sports. Throughout this thesis, we’ve seen the transformation of the discourse from an oral expression to a textualization. The evolution of it transferring from athletes to corporations is striking in that the whole industry is conforming to the narcissistic mindset that sports are disconnected from politics. Corporations impairing employees with tainted journalism matches Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony (Gramsci & Hoare, 1971). “Stick to sports” modifies this theory by shaping cultural institutions into sporting commodities. Journalistic integrity, along with humanitarianism, is snubbed by the discourse for corporate compensation. Instead of restating our previous findings with the usage of “stick to sports,” we want to push it forward.

Our study has seized upon massive sports organizations, deconstructing the impact of the “stick to sports” discourse. In this final section, we would like to examine two women that we believe help thrust the discourse ahead: Doris Burke and Mina Kimes. Both have divergent backgrounds but share optimism for successive women, while transcending the power of “stick to sports.” Traditionally, women have taken a back seat to men, but Burke and Kimes have bucked that assumption, continuing to persevere. Women have been shamed into thinking that public spaces belong to men since there is unfair access (Brady, 2005). Burke and Kimes not only breach sport boundaries but also reformulate societal norms.

Societal norms of gender roles placement, but also norms described as “formal status inequality” (Eagly, 1983). This term legitimizes social norms by lodging them in the formal structure of organizations (p. 972). Sports have become an outlet for escapism, and “stick to sports” fortifies through institutions. It is a tool that has been molded and exploited to subjugate

individuals. An item interrupting athlete activism, curving editorial independence, and conjoining gender roles with job positions. Luckily, regions of the industry have begun to repel the discourse. Now, women are gaining prominence with the help of Burke and Kimes.

Doris Burke's Breakthrough

ESPN has housed Doris Burke since 1991, covering both NCAA Basketball and the WNBA as a sideline reporter (O'Connell, 2017). She occasionally would fill in as an NBA Announcer until she was promoted to a full-time position during the 2017-2018 season, making her the first woman to do so. She was another female success story, with each one mitigating "stick to sports." In the industry, women's struggle to emulate men has derived from their incapability of analyzing sports (O'Connell, 2017). Burke's breakthrough has sparked hope and elation for future women. One could argue that the athletic background that she possesses aids her analysis coverage. However, we advocate that it exemplifies the discourse's weaknesses.

Naturally, players bear an advantage over spectators on evaluating the game but it's a justification tactic. What it's saying is that Burke's success lies within her relationship to the game, degrading her commitment and hard work. "Stick to sports" has resorted to a one-dimensional system by stalling progression. Burke's devotion to succeeding has led her to a triumphant career. She's amassed respect from several sports colleagues, as well as receiving critical acclaim from traditional fans. Still in viable condition, Deadspin wrote that Burke was "the best damn basketball broadcaster," ESPN Commentator Jeff Van Gundy echoed that, by

pronouncing her as the “LeBron James of sportscasters,” and she even has received respect with rapper Drake (Remnick, 2019).

For the longest time, “stick to sports” has prided itself on liquidating athlete activism, inadvertently affecting other areas close by. A dichotomy is formed by the discourse between gender roles and occupational positions. Men are dominating the field of play-by-play announcers while qualified women concede to sideline reporting jobs (Ruiz, 2019). Burke has jarred “stick to sports,” ascending in the industry proving she’s more valuable than a pretty face. She also praises ESPN for the effort of investing in women. Burke expounds saying, “You can criticize ESPN for many things, but as a company, we should be commended for the fact that we’re now starting the process of putting women in these roles” (Reimer, 2016).

The discourse has brainwashed the industry into accepting that gender preferences designate professional environments. It took time, some would argue too much, for Burke to climb up the corporate ladder but it is progress. “Stick to sports” has lost its sovereignty allowing for clarity and freedom. Burke has stood tall against it, withstanding the obstacles that have systematically derailed others. While women’s future in sports journalism appeared bleak, Burke offered some reassurance with her feats. The confidence she owns is a vital skill to building charisma. Surely, she is a woman who has outrivaled the dominion of “stick to sports.”

Mina Kimes Time

Mina Kimes is another silent proponent in the “stick to sports” era. She, too, is a pioneer for the discourse’s shrinkage. Sports surrounded Kimes’s childhood, but she wasn’t quite

receptive to it. Unlike Burke, Kimes didn't invest in her interest in sports until her Tumblr post about the fondness she carried for the Seattle Seahawks captivated ESPN (Robertson, 2019). That fondness stemmed from the relationship with her father leading her to becoming a sports phenomenon (Kimes, 2014). Before sports writing, Kimes enjoyed a seven-year career as an investigative financial journalist, working for both Fortune and Bloomberg in which she was highly regarded (Robertson, 2019). When ESPN noticed the article, they offered her a position, which Kimes accepted because it felt right (Sprung, 2018). It wasn't long until her eminence was thriving inside the network.

Kimes might've begun as a senior writer in 2014, but she's displayed the capability of wearing multiple hats. She has found herself working for ESPN The Magazine, Podcasts, making guest appearances on Around The Horn, Highly Questionable, and The Dan Le Batard Show (Sprung, 2018). Alongside this, she provided color commentating for the Los Angeles Rams preseason games in 2019 (Robertson, 2019). It's a big accomplishment given that men's dominance in the field has allowed them to become integrated into women's sports too. Thus, Bethany Swaton (2010) stresses how warped women's view on athletic leadership becomes, trusting they don't possess the willpower required (p. 8). Combine this erroneous apprehension with the minimal opportunities women receive in the industry, and we might lose even more female representations in sports (Walker & Bopp, 2011).

A change is long overdue because the stigma of "stick to sports" has barricaded gender rights. We have begun to see that change with Kimes' quick escalation as a business writer to a sports columnist--and a damn good one at that. The dexterity she parades by balancing numerous tasks is exceptional, figuratively speaking. Within six years at ESPN, and as a sportswriter, she has racked critical praise, continuing to disown the discourse. A Nebraskan-made woman, Yale

graduate, and a “daddy’s-girl,” who idolized her father’s love for sports has now soared to new heights, punting cliched narratives to the side (“Mina Kimes,” 2020; Kimes, 2014).

“Stick to Sports” Cryptic Future

The weight that “stick to sports” carried only diminished the potential, when it believed that it was saving the industry. Manipulating the discourse thought to satisfy audiences, guard earnings, and revolutionize sports. While it was shown to offer relief to consumers, its stymied integrity along with gender assignments. “Stick to sports” promoted fairness, equality, and focus. It’s a tool that expressed the amelioration of the sporting industry but failed to deliver. Rather, the discourse tamed talking heads, curved editorial independence, and sabotaged feminism.

Deadspin’s demise can be categorized as a lesson. The company retaliated after being instructed to adjust its policies for financial gains. This discourse that deemed supremacy to everything in its path quickly found itself in exotic territory. With the company’s brisk extinction, “stick to sports” lost its function to detain. Now, women have been graced to pursue more enhanced titles, thanks to Doris Burke and Mina Kimes. No longer suffering from the discourse hampering their credibility. We’re not stating that “stick to sports” has been conquered, however it’s been fractured. There are holes in the discourse that were once thought to be impenetrable. Hence, the future of “stick to sports” appears uncertain and unpredictable despite its institutional power.

The Power of “Stick To”

Throughout this thesis, we’ve articulated how “stick to sports” has diminished the sports industry through various case studies. However, we haven’t scrutinized the function of “stick to.” Of course “stick to sports” is a modern phrase now, but this discourse stretches far beyond that. Sports can be replaced with any word, and essentially the same standards apply. For example, “stick to singing,” “stick to acting,” “stick to teaching,” just to name a few. The overarching question becomes, “can a person have a voice beyond their profession?” The “stick to sports” narrative serves to codify how athletes participate in sports media and sidelines those voices when it comes to political speech.

The power of “stick to ...” dismantles transparency by demanding the subject/s to succumb to a robotic script and stature. “Stick to ...” requires stagnation ordering the subject to oblige. It’s a cautionary reminder, a disciplining, that they don’t supersede their profession. We develop an apolitical perspective with the discourse’s skill to falsify and discipline. “Stick to ...” misleads the subject, manipulating them into “playing by the rules,” simultaneously pleasing the audience. The subjects are sterilized and beholden to the discourse, in its extreme resembling a form of puppetry.

“Stick to sports” is now a clearly articulated discourse with its political potency that continues to gain momentum in sports media. “Stick to ...” limits morality, sincerity, or fairness by caging those qualities. Instead, it awards opacity, rewarding subjects that symbolize bland profitability over critical ferocity. Even the phrasing of “stick to” implies obedience and an adhesion to mainstream social norms. In other words, it suggests that there will be consequences

if the subject traverses the artificial ideological boundaries presupposed for athletes or entertainers or musicians or anyone disrupting apolitical codes of conduct.

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