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# Banging Heads - Media Portrayals of Injuries in Professional Football Before and After the Death of Mike Webster

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BANGING HEADS - MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF INJURIES IN PROFESSIONAL  
FOOTBALL BEFORE AND AFTER THE DEATH OF MIKE WEBSTER

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
Communication, Technology & Society

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by  
Alexander Moe  
May 2014

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Bryan Denham, Committee Chair  
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Dr. Travers Scott

## ABSTRACT

This study addresses the influence of a trigger event on mainstream news coverage of injuries in professional football. In 2002, four-time Super Bowl winner and NFL Hall of Famer Mike “Iron Mike” Webster passed away due to what is known today as Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), a condition that develops in the brain after multiple impacts. It has been confirmed that Webster sustained CTE from his 17-year NFL career, although medical evidence at the time of his death did not exist, and his passing was instead attributed to heart failure. This is an empirical analysis of how the trigger event of Webster’s death impacted mainstream print reports of injuries in the National Football League.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis addresses the influence of a trigger event in mass communication; specifically, it examines how the death of a former professional football player, Mike “Iron Mike” Webster, a four-time Super Bowl winner and NFL Hall of Fame inductee, influenced news coverage of injuries in professional football. Head injuries have received prominent agenda space in recent years (Omalu, Dekosky, Minster, Kamboh, Hamilton & Wecht, 2005; Omalu, 2008; Schwartz, 2009; McKee, Stein & Nowinski, 2012), reaching the point where United States President Barack Obama and NFL Commissioner Roger Goddell have been involved in public debates, positioning themselves on opposite ends of the spectrum in regard to the safety of the game and the way it is played today. The President has expressed concern about player safety while wishing to preserve the nature of the game (Foer & Hughes, 2013; Loumena, 2013).

Worth noting is the culture and myth surrounding the Pittsburgh Steelers, the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania metropolitan area, and its fans during the 1970s, a time period in which the team won four Super Bowls and were widely known for a physical playing style (Millman & Coyne, 2010). During this time Webster was in the center of this, in the most literal sense (i.e., playing the position of ‘center,’ and considered a ‘household name’). Sentiments regarding the city and team Webster lived in and played for are reflected upon in a 2013 documentary by Frontline/PBS on concussions in the NFL, in which Stan Stavran, a Pittsburgh Sports reporter: “This is a tough town. The people here are tough, tough minded. The way the Steelers played the game meshed perfectly with

the people. ... That just fit perfectly, into how they saw their own lives, and how they had to be in order to survive” (Kirk, 2013). Attesting Webster’s personae among fans and inhabitants of the Pittsburgh area, Julian Bailes, a former team physician with the Steelers offer the following statement in the documentary: “Mike Webster exemplified what it was like to be a player in the ‘Steel City’, and a player in that era that for me, was the greatest team of all time” (Kirk, 2013). Furthermore, the Pittsburgh Steelers, its history, myth and nostalgia is reflected and elaborated on in recent texts, among titles that read; *The Ones Who Hit the Hardest* (Millman & Coyne, 2010), and *The Last Headbangers* (Cook, 2012). These titles sum up the mentality which encapsulated the Steelers in the time period Webster played. They also may be considered directly opposed to the style of play and socioeconomic culture surrounding the 1980s San Francisco 49ers, and 1990s Dallas Cowboys, its industries (i.e., tech and oil respectively) and metropolitan areas (i.e., climate) alike (Millman & Coyne, 2010; Cook, 2012; Pomerantz, 2013).

This study sheds light on issues that may be considered on a larger scale than solely linked to football, as concussions bear similar traits to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and HIV during their early stages. Being coined ‘invisible injuries’ (Kelly, 2012), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) (Omalu, 2008; McKee et. al., 2009) bear similar traits to those linked to debates surrounding PTSD in Army personnel (Tupper, 2013), the stage of public knowledge (i.e., lack of), and the stigma in relation to HIV in the early 1980’s (Landau, 2011). Medical conditions such as these, including concussions and head injuries fulfill the ‘invisible’ trait that is treated differently in societal respects, and its normative stigma

often seem to triumph medical assertions. This might be the case due to lack of recognition, knowledge, and perhaps frequency of occurrence, or a lack of all these factors. A reported high school football players died from head and neck injuries in 2013 (Mallnowski, 2013), and in some cases players have experienced ‘headaches’ and ‘dizziness’, but are told to ‘walk it off’, and: “Quit acting like a pussy and get back out there!” (Bernstein, 2013). The normative attributions and lack of understanding injuries that do not appear in the same regard as to ‘visible injuries’ (i.e., broken tibia) can be considered a strong contributing factor to the casualties related to concussions (i.e., TBI) and head injuries (i.e., CTE) surrounding the game of football (Kelly, 2012; Bernstein, 2013; Mallnowski, 2013).

A trigger event, also known as a ‘focusing event,’ shapes the landscape of mass media and journalism by its nature in being a real world event that affects, punctuates, or invades current agenda space (Birkland, 1997; Dearing and Rogers, 1996). Using a controversial issue in professional football (i.e., concussions and head injuries), this study will content-analyze news coverage and examine which attributes of an issue were evident prior to and after a focusing event. The study will build on previous studies conducted on trigger events, which can involve real-world events or media-generated events. Denham (1999) considered a media event in the case of former professional football player Lyle Alzado, who blamed an inoperable brain lymphoma on abuse of anabolic steroids: the study examined how an Alzado cover story in *Sports Illustrated* influenced mainstream press coverage of anabolic steroid use (Denham, 1999). Denham (2004) also examined how the prominent sports magazine built an agenda for mainstream

press coverage and helped to shape the policy agenda regarding drug use in professional baseball.

Trigger events can be considered a part of the agenda-setting framework (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Agenda-setting theory was established by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw who, after conducting what became known as the “Chapel Hill Study” on the 1968 presidential election, found there was a correlation between what people thought was the most important election issue and what the national media emphasized (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory holds that the media have the power to make issues more salient by providing a more prominent place or devoting a large amount of news space to the respective issue (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Kim, Han, Choi & Kim, 2012). McCombs and Shaw (1993) also stated, “just as objects vary in salience, so do the attributes of each object” (p. 62). Second-level agenda-setting, also known as attribute agenda setting, suggests that the media can influence the way the audience thinks about issues (McCombs, 2005; Griffin, 2008).

Scholarship in political science characterizes a focusing event as an event that comes out of a sudden, unpredictable occurrence that causes focus and reaction from third party actors (e.g., media entities, political figures) and influences the policy process (Birkland, 1997; Birkland, 2006; Kingdon, 2003). Birkland (1997) differentiates focusing events from the aspects within a political spectrum that cause gradual change over time, for instance the New Deal era and Health insurance reform. “Whereas long-term social change is often the result of the ebb and flow of broader social and economic conditions, social change and conflict are often punctuated by sharp, sudden events” (Birkland, 1997,

p 2). One may not have to look far in considering this statement, as long-term social change can be found in marriage equality debates and discussions linked to race and gender, whereas a focus event is an incident that is sharp and punctuates the ongoing long-term discussions, and perhaps more established discourses within society (see ‘punctuated equilibrium’, Baumgartner & Jones, 2005). Such focus often appears after the death of a prominent or known individual, or an accident; for example, terrorist acts, railway collisions, industrial explosions, assassinations, and/or unforeseen deaths of publicly known individuals, which not only causes, but requires, immediate reaction from the agenda and its perceived gatekeepers (Birkland, 1997, 2006).

Trigger events can be seen as the mediated version of a ‘punctuated equilibrium,’ as they also are a form of focusing events (Birkland, 1997; Kingdon, 2005; Baumgartner and Jones, 2003; Birkland, 2006). Triggering events are often events that in some way disturb the present order of a respective community or society at large. Examples of triggering events can be seen from events such as: the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the Exxon Valdez oil spill. However, when the scope is narrowed, one may also narrow the triggering event. Within sports, a strong triggering event might occur when current or former players die at a relatively young age. This seems to be especially true when their cause of death can be directly linked to their sport, whether the way it has been played or the way it is currently played, while also considering cultural aspects within the respective forum or arena.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Agenda Setting Theory**

Walter Lippmann's (1922) article "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Head" developed from a "preparadigmatic perspective" (see Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 10, table 1.2) into what we today know as agenda-setting theory. Lippmann brought to light the role of the press as providers of the raw materials, from which public opinion is constructed. McCombs (2004) cites Lippmann's statement in *Public Opinion* that "The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (p. 1). This involves putting emphasis on the intangibles of news and politics as something separate from the human, individual comprehension, something invisible that is constantly shifting underneath our feet.

Lippmann argued that the mass media is the principal catalyst in connecting real world events, coupled with how we (i.e., the audience of mass media) imagine these events. More recently, McCombs (2004) argues, we have television, and an expanding platform of communication technologies, as also stated by Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo (2002) that media coverage of salient issues can provide content for users on the internet who engage in discussions" (p. 464). Therefore, with new and emerging media (e.g., electronic bulletin boards, social media) in mind, the essence remains the same: "For nearly all of the concerns on the public agenda, citizens deal with a second-hand reality, a reality that is structured by journalists' reports about these events and situations" (McCombs, 2004, p. 1).

McCombs (2004) argues the salience of agenda setting theory pertaining to new media, stating that “once people understand the basic idea of agenda-setting, they are usually quick to ask which medium is more powerful in setting the public agenda, television or newspapers. The answer is, ‘it depends.’” (p. 48) pointing out the influence of each media matters toward the attribute salience of each topic, and that it varies from one situation to another. And that not every agenda-setting study brings to mind a comparison between media, as studies tend to rely on a single medium as a surrogate for that of the news media, “relying upon the well-established assumption of a high degree of redundancy across the news agendas of individual media” (McCombs, 2004, p. 48).

Lippmann’s efforts were likely the first work that existed before agenda-setting research was considered. Though Lippmann attended Harvard University, he never finished his studies, he never taught at a university, and he did not think further research was needed to expand on this process. Despite this, Lippmann is considered the single most influential writer and thinker on how mass media shapes public opinion (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

As elaborated on by Dearing and Rogers (1996), Harold D. Lasswell, a political scientist, “was one of the forefathers of communication study in the United States” (p. 11). Lasswell posed a multi-tailed question, which became a model for communication and mass media research: “Who says what to whom via which channels and with what effect?” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p 11). Furthermore, Lasswell contended that the two most important functions of mass media in society are surveillance and correlation. Surveillance is seen when news people scan for constantly changing information (i.e.,

police reports, press releases, the AP wire). From this scanning of constant changing information, news people become gatekeepers of information, deciding what events should receive attention (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

Lasswell's perspective, dating back to 1948, is relevant in the bigger picture of agenda-setting due to his surveillance and gatekeeper perspectives in relation to the news. Lasswell (1948), along with Lippmann (1922) and Cohen (1963), are considered to be part of the preparadigmatic stage of agenda-setting, which is its current form as an established theory today. As cited by Dearing and Rogers (1996), Lasswell "describes communication performing the vital function of enabling a living organism like a society to synchronize the importance accorded to an issue by its constituent parts" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 11). This statement should be considered as vital to the way we understand communication today, as it was with its inception in 1948.

Bernard Cohen (1963) built on Lippmann (1922) and Lasswell's (1948) work with his well-known mantra, "The media may not tell us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about" (p. 65). However it was in "The Chapel Hill Study" McCombs and Shaw (1972) established the framework of agenda-setting research. They interviewed 100 undecided voters in the Chapel Hill, North Carolina area, while conducting a content analysis of nine (9) local media outlets and their coverage of the 1968 presidential election. During this study they asked the participants what they considered the five most important issues facing the country at the particular time. With a strong correlation between the salience of top five issues as seen in the media, and the reported salience on the public agenda, the researchers established

empirical evidence about the power of mass media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Dearing & Rogers, 1996). McCombs and Shaw (1972) then concluded that people attributed the most important issues of the then 1968 election to what the media addressed as the most important issues.

McCombs (2004) states that agenda-setting is not simply a theory in which audience members are considered ‘empty minded drones,’ simply waiting to be programmed by a news outlet. Rather, according to McCombs, “Agenda-setting does assign a central role to the news media in initiating items for the public agenda. Or, to paraphrase Lippmann, the information provided by the news media plays a key role in the construction of our pictures of reality” (p. 6). Furthermore, McCombs (2004) suggests the set of information, on a complete stage, provided by news media, aggregates the creation of such images.

Attesting to the foundational principles of agenda-setting theory, McCombs and Shaw (1993) paraphrase Conant (1951) stating, “the hallmark of a successful theory is its fruitfulness in continually generating new questions and identifying new avenues of scholarly inquiry” (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, p. 58). McCombs and Shaw add to Conant’s claim, outlining the fruitfulness of the agenda-setting theory as (a) having steady growth within its own literature, (b) having the ability to integrate several fields of communication research underneath one theoretical umbrella, through several stages of expansion, and (c) the ability to continue the generation of new research (McCombs & Shaw, 1993).

Dearing and Rogers (1996) contend, “A better understanding of the agenda-setting process lies at the intersection of mass communication research and political science, as agenda-setting can directly affect policy” (p. 4). An issue can be defined as a social problem, often one pertaining to conflict, and is receiving media coverage and/or attention. Proponents on either side of a social problem, for instance child abuse, do not battle over whether or not it is good or bad, the proponents in such cases battle over how to solve the agreed-upon social problem (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). This is also the nature of this study due to the contention that no one wants to see football players lying lifeless on the field, nor know that they might not fare well after they walk off the field for the very last time.

Dearing and Rogers (1996) explains further the agenda itself from a more macro perspective, according to the following principles, “We can think of issues as “rising or falling” (p. 3) on the agenda or “competing with one another for attention to be given to an issue, help determine the position of an issue on the agenda, sometimes at the cost of another issue or issues” (p. 3). Zhu (1992) contends that agenda-setting can be a ‘zero-sum game’ due to the scarce resources in space and time on the agenda. Applied to agenda-setting, it describes a fundamental contradiction in a pluralist democracy; “The vast number of social issues that are being raised on the one hand and the limited carrying capacity that the public agenda possesses to handle these issues on the other hand. The inevitable consequence of this contradiction is intense competition among issues” (Zhu, 1992, p. 825). This further explains how any addition of a new issue to the public agenda comes at the cost of other issues (Zhu, 1992).

McCombs (1992, 2004) offers an explanation of the four perspectives, or phases of agenda-setting. These four sections are formally known as the Acapulco Typology (McCombs, 2004), and are defined as having two dichotomous dimensions. The first dimension distinguishes between two ways of considering agendas: “The focus of attention can either be on the entire set of items that define the agenda or be narrowed down to a single, particular item on the agenda” (p. 30). The second dimension differentiates between two ways of recording public salience of items on the agenda, whereas “aggregate measures describing an entire group or population versus measures that describe individual responses. The combination of these two dimensions describes the four distinct perspectives on agenda setting” (McCombs, 2004, p 30).

Perspective I considers the agenda as a whole and uses aggregate measures of a sample population to conclude and establish the salience of each item. “The Chapel Hill Study” relied on this perspective as the salience of the five major issues in the occurring presidential election was determined by two aggregate measures of the election setting. Furthermore, the salience of the issues from a media agenda perspective was defined by the percentage of news articles on each issue. While for the public agenda, the percentage of voters who thought the government should attend to each issue, reflected that of the media. This issue is called ‘competition’ due to its examination of a multitude of issues competing for positions on the agenda (Zhu, 1992; McCombs, 2004).

Perspective II is similar to perspective I in terms of focusing on the entire agenda as it pertains to issues. This is the only similar trait as perspective II focuses on the agenda of each individual. Perspective I can be considered a “system level” (McCombs,

2004, p 31), while perspective II is more related to the individual level. This perspective is called 'automation' due to its view on human behavior as auto-pilots, receiving coordinates from the set agenda. McCombs (2004) elaborates, "For agenda-setting to occur in this situation, there must be individuals who are susceptible to being significantly programmed by the mass media" (p. 31). Arguing that mass media indeed has a tremendous ability to influence the views of each individual regarding the salience of a set of issues. However, the agenda being able to influence the individual is something that does not occur on a frequent scale.

Perspective III considers the focus on single issues on the agenda. However, similar to perspective I, perspective III utilize aggregate measures to gauge the salience of each item. Usually, measuring salience is related to the total number of news stories about an issue and how much the public refers to that issue as the most important problem that is currently facing the country. Due to these factors, perspective III is called "natural history" (McCombs, 2004, p 31), considering its historical focus on single issues on media and public agendas (McCombs, 2004).

Perspective IV, the final perspective in the Acapulco typology, focuses also on the individual, but considers merely the salience of single items as they appear on the agenda. Perspective IV is commonly referred to as the "cognitive portrait" (McCombs, 2004, p 32); it is defined as by McCombs (2004) as "Illustrated by the experimental studies of agenda-setting in which the salience of a single issue for an individual is measured before and after exposure to news programmes where the amount of exposure to various issues is controlled" (p. 32). Arguably, these issues may also be issues that have previously

occurred, such as a focusing event, in which one may measure the salience of the respective issue, and related media exposure before and after the event, to help identify the respective event as an event that causes issues to appear on the agenda.

McCombs (1992) explains that a separate fourth phase of agenda-setting emerged, as defining the news media from an independent variable to a dependent variable. While noting the original research question, “Who sets the news agenda?” the fourth phase is defined by asking, “Who sets the media agenda?” (p. 816). From this phase, agenda-setting research transformed the original conceptualization, whereas gatekeeping research relied on a psychological perspective, which has now been replaced by a sociological perspective.

Scholars have also studied a convergence effect on the part of news media. In a study comparing media use and agenda agreement among different reference groups, Shaw and Martin (1992) found a correlation between increases in newspaper reading and agreement on important issues within the gender, race and age groups to which an audience members belong. In their study, Shaw and Martin (1992) found among their results, that men and women who did not read the newspaper, agreed with one another on public issues, on a moderate level. Men and women who were reported as heavy newspaper consumers (i.e., four to seven newspapers consumed per week) were in complete agreement with one another on the four issues that were studied.

According to Shaw and Martin (1992), this also encapsulates increased television news consumption to group consensus on important public issues. Further arguing that the news media “Incidentally and indirectly, [news media] function to provide just

enough agreement on public issues to provide at least dialogue between, for example, men and women, blacks and whites, old and young, more educated and less educated and rich and poor” (p. 902). For the purposes of the study herein, Shaw and Martin’s (1992) study sheds light on how the media describe, and highlight, certain issues. This can be expanded to general injury coverage, including head injuries among professional football players. This can be seen during the course of a football season, when players on various rosters get injured as the season progresses; however this is seen through the scope of the media, with narratives such as but not limited to ‘the unfortunate season ending injury,’ or the ‘wimpy long lasting recovery.’ What Shaw and Martin (1992) help to establish, is the seemingly obvious sentiment that certain types of media foci occur more often. For example, head injuries in professional football are something that is portrayed as either in need of removal from the game, or change the game itself, meaning they are not simply portrayed as ‘a part of the game.’ Shaw and Martin state in their study: “The news media may, therefore, function to bring convergence on social issues, but only if audiences themselves participate by reading and viewing, individually” (Shaw & Martin, 1992, p. 916), pointing out the need for media adherence among its audience (i.e., the media) in order to establish sentiment on respective issues.

### **Attribute Agenda-setting**

The Agenda-setting operates on two levels. First-level agenda-setting, refers to the transfer of salience of individual objects, while second level agenda-setting refers to the transfer of object attributes (McCombs, 2004). McCombs (2005) hold that the first stage of agenda-setting theory is focused on the salience of objects, usually in regards to

public issues. For example, drug use, and the war on drugs is a highly charged and widely discussed, public issue in the United States, and an example McCombs (2004) uses to illuminate what he means by salience of (i.e., individual) objects on the public agenda. Questions relating to the salience of each individual object often appear as follows: What should be done about the drug problem? What drugs should be legal, under what conditions? What are drugs? (McCombs, 2004). Attribute agenda-setting thus focuses on the attributes of objects, or attribute salience of each object. McCombs (2005) further explains this process: “The term “object” is used here in the same way that social psychologists use the phrase “attitude object” to designate the thing that an individual has an attitude or opinion about” (p. 546).

This becomes a counter-intuitive version of one of the foundational mantras of agenda-setting theory as a whole: “The media may not tell us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about” (Cohen, 1963, p 65). As the media in regards to salience on each individual topic, operating seemingly on preconceived, pre-established, attitudes within their audiences.

Furthermore, Dearing and Rogers (1996) define salience as “the degree to which an issue on the agenda is perceived as relatively important. The heart of the agenda-setting process is when the salience of an issue changes on the media agenda, the public agenda, or the policy agenda” (p. 8). They contend that the scholar of agenda-setting is one who measures how issue-salience changes, and why the change occurs.

Dearing and Rogers (1996) hold that scholars might study portrayals of public issues (e.g., drugs in America) and how they are portrayed on television news, in order to

conclude if the media favors one point or the other. However, “an agenda-setting scholar studying the abortion issue in the U.S. media would ask, “how important” is the abortion issue on television news?” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p 8). The agenda-setting scholar is then trying to find how the issue at hand compares with other issues, in the amount of coverage each issue gets (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

The above statements tie directly into the study at hand, as it attempts to find out if the premature death of a former prominent professional football player (Mike Webster), has directly affected coverage of (i.e., negative) attributes that are inevitable to have existed in football, and how this coverage compares to the time while Webster was alive.

McCombs and Shaw (1993) describe political candidates in their study as operating within attribute agendas as well, noting it is not a phenomenon utilized by media entities exclusively: “just as objects vary in salience, so do the attributes of each object. The 1976 election study not only considered an agenda of candidates’ it focused more specifically on the candidates’ agendas of attributes” (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, p.62). From this, one may argue that each candidate operates with attribute issues that may be ‘trigger (attribute) issues’ pertaining to issues the candidates perhaps attempt to ‘hard sell’ due to the individual attributes being (i.e., established as) salient either over a longer or shorter period of time.

In addition to this explanation, McCombs and Shaw (1993) further argue that communication is indeed a process that can be about either a set of objectives, or a single object, fighting for attention. Griffin (2008) adds that the media make some issues more

salient, and that we spend more time focusing on these issues, and therefore, he states, we regard them as more important (i.e., than issues receiving less attention). In addition, Prosser and McCombs (1991) identify 'geographic proximity' and contend national news has more impact in terms of agenda-setting than local news stories.

Second-level agenda-setting resembles research on framing theory. However, it is argued that frames are a part of an organized form of argued attributes (McCombs, 2005). McCombs (2005) explains frames as included with attributes as "Positioning the concept of a frame in the context of attributes establishes a useful boundary between frames and other attributes" (p. 546). Meaning that a frame identifies two types of attributes, "aspect" and "central" themes (p. 546). McCombs continues, "Aspects are a general category of attributes. Central themes are a delimited category of attributes because they are the attributes defining a dominant perspective on an object" (McCombs, 2005, p. 546). Ghanem (1996) first introduced the perspective that some types of attributes work as sound arguments in establishing salience, which thus includes framing as part of (i.e., attribute) agenda-setting.

### **Obtrusive and Unobtrusive Issues**

The individual person does not rely solely on the mass media as a source of information. Sources of information can come from watching the news, however it can also come from personal experience, our social networks (e.g., friends, family and coworkers) with whom we engage in conversations, from which learning and information is shared. The most effective or salient source of influence will vary depending on each topic (McCombs, 2004). Denham (2004) cites Lang and Lang (1983) on the reciprocal

relationships between the public, the press, and public policymakers. A trait that helps to define the agenda setting theory is how the media might not tell us what to think, but do tell us what to think about (Cohen, 1965; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2004; McCombs, 2005). This mantra is held to be true, especially when an issue appears to be unobtrusive rather than obtrusive (Winter, Eyal & Rogers, 1982).

Unobtrusive events are known to be related to issues in which the average audience member (i.e. to that of mediated news information) has less direct experience with in their daily lives. Issues such as national debt deficit, stimulus packages, and pollution are unobtrusive and we rely solely on the media as a dominant source of information. Obtrusive issues are thus, issues that obtrude (i.e., become noticeable) in our daily lives. Most audience members can relate to these issues through other dominant sources of information than solely relying on the media. Obtrusive issues may be local crime, traffic issues, grocery prices and inflation in the economy (see McCombs, 2004, p. 61, box 4.3).

This study consider the coverage of injuries in professional football, along with the death of Mike Webster, as unobtrusive events. Although many fans and readers have at some point played and worn football equipment, one may contend that the average reader cannot fathom what it may 'feel' first-hand to play in the environment of professional football. (i.e., the physical aspect of being tackled by or attempting to block opposing players). Furthermore while considering the findings of Weaver and Drew (1993), and Shaw and Martin (1992), the average reader, as well as the devout fan, will to some extent rely on national media while following the spectacle of professional football,

from which he or she will learn possibly that (i.e., and agree with one another on certain sentiments) professional football, through the lens of this study, is going through a “concussion crisis” (Omalu, 2008; McKee, et. al. 2009; Carroll & Rosner, 2011).

McCombs (2004) states: “Because obtrusive issues are defined as issues obtruding into people’s everyday lives, personal experience in many instances will sufficiently orient individuals to the situation at hand” (p. 62), while further stating that: “On the other hand, personal experience is not a sufficient source of orientation for unobtrusive issues. For these, the theoretical assumption is that the media agenda is commonly the primary source of orientation” (p. 62). Thus, Zucker (1978) shares his perspective on the salience of each issue, compared when reported on through mass media. Arguing the less contact audience members have with a given issue (i.e., the issue being unobtrusive), the more the media has the ability to influence public opinion on the respective issue, and by that, the media has the ability to influence public policy.

### **Trigger Events**

Triggering events are single dramatic events which trigger media coverage (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). Trigger events are occurrences that lie within actual events, but also related to the attribute salience of the actual problem. The attribute saliency in triggering events, such as the death of Mike Webster, lies in its human element. Triggering events can vary in scale, however, the given event is deemed to trigger a response from the agenda, its gatekeepers as “trigger events play a dominant role in putting and issue on the U.S. media agenda” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 91). The death

of Mike Webster was considered a triggering event in this study due to its humanistic aspect of a public figure passing away prematurely at the age of only 50 years old.

Dearing and Rogers add: “Most issues have potential indicators of their objective severity or risk as a social problem. Often, the indicator is a single variable” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p 28). Dearing and Rogers (1996) explain real-world indicators as indicators that are neither a necessity nor enough cause for an issue to climb the agenda. Stating that “agenda setting often comes from a human tragedy like the death of a celebrity or from a spectacular news event like the US government closing down for a few days due to a budget crisis (as happened in 1996)” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 29). Pointing out the human element is necessary for an issue to climb on the agenda. Even though real-world indicators can be severe and devastating (i.e., socially, geographically, demographically), the given real world will be considered more attribute salient if provided a human and perhaps individual aspect to the event.

Manning (2001) clarifies the difference between real world indicators and trigger events as:

By trigger events, Dearing and Rogers are referring to examples such as the first of Michael Buerk’s BBC news reports from a refugee camp during the 1984 Ethiopian famine, or to take an example from an earlier section of this book, the early reports of dead seals being washed up on the coasts of Britain and the Netherlands. While ‘real world indicators’ usually take a form often regarded by journalists, and perhaps the public, as dry statistics,’ trigger events always involve a human-interest angle of some kind. Images of suffering or drama, or of a potential threat, certainly attract more news interest and may play a part in the cognitive processes through which audience agendas are constructed (p. 216).

The death of Mike Webster will be considered a trigger event in the present study (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Manning, 2001). Considering Webster’s household-name

status around the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area (perhaps also nationally among fans), his four Super Bowl championships with the same team, and Hall of Fame status, the event of his passing fulfills Dearing and Rogers' (1996) test to what "boosts up an agenda" (p. 29).

### **Focusing Events**

This section considers appropriate scholarship from the political science discipline in order to better comprehend the agenda setting processes that go beyond the existence of the mass media. While the political science discipline often consider the same issues from different, more macro perspectives, 'agenda-setting' in terms of the media is often perceived by political scientists as being a simple reflection of public opinion (Edwards, Jacobs & Shapiro, 2011). However, considering the existing scholarship within political science is vital for the understanding and application of not only 'agenda-setting', but the very concept of the 'agenda'.

There are events that trigger swift responses due to their humanistic nature. Such events are called focusing events, and are defined as an event that creates a window of opportunity for policy to be implemented as a response to such an event (Birkland, 2006).

It is also helpful to make the distinction between the impact of such problems that may emerge from, or in the wake of a focusing event:

Problems are often not self-evident by the indicators. They need a little push to get the attention of people in and around government. That push is sometimes provided by a focusing event like a crisis or disaster that comes along to call attention to the problem, a powerful symbol that catches on, or the personal experience of a policy maker. (Kingdon, 2003, p. 95).

Such problems, in the various forms as exemplified by Kingdon (2003), can be elaborated on as events such as the September 11th terrorist attacks, the bombing of a U.S. (i.e. or any nations) embassy in a foreign country (Birkland, 2006), or even events such as a policy makers family member or close connection being exposed to sudden harm from or by a third party, such as being an accidental bystander during a mass-shooting, getting harmed by a drunk driver, or being trapped inside of a building during an earthquake.

Birkland (1997; 2006) also makes the distinction between crisis, disasters and catastrophes as he considers them three different types of focusing events. Crises happen when organizations take action or inaction. Furthermore it is argued that disasters occur due to natural phenomena or unrelated human action (Birkland, 1997). Emergences of crisis “depend upon the way in which they are interpreted by relevant actors, which determines whether these events become policy issues” (Birkland, 2006, p. 3).

Examples of the distinction between the three factors within focusing events (i.e. crisis, disaster and catastrophes) is elaborated on by Birkland (2006), in which the nuclear power plant meltdown of Chernobyl is labeled a crisis (i.e. due to either action or inaction in an organization), the September 11th attacks a disaster (i.e. due to unrelated human action), and Hurricane Katrina a catastrophe due to the natural element, which thus can be seen as unfortunate, but unavoidable to a certain extent (Birkland, 2006).

Focusing events, are as previously stated, sudden and are often devastating to the affected part of society, an organization, and to the involved individuals. Due to the nature of these events, they also have the ability to take over the current agenda,

regardless of what it is focused on at the time (Kingdon, 2003). As Kingdon argues: “Such events demand some sort of action so clearly that even inaction is a decision. On the other hand, potential agenda items sometimes languish in the background for lack of a crisis that would push them forward” (Kingdon, 2003, p.96).

It is also important to consider focusing events as issues that carry something with them, as they rarely stand alone on the policy agenda. Such issues carrying something with them can be defined as having the ability to highlight what has previously been considered a problem, but not having been attended to due to various circumstances, a busy agenda being one of these (Kingdon, 2003). However as they arrive, focusing event focuses attention to problems that have been or is already “in the back of peoples minds” (Kingdon, 2003, p.98).

Kingdon’s (2003) research highlights some of the interview statements in regarding the American system and its ability, and method in responding to such issues as: “The whole process is a crisis. This system responds to crisis. It’s the only thing that it does respond to. That’s what politics is all about. In the American system, you have to get hit on the side of the head before you do something” (Kingdon, 2003, p. 95). This data points not necessarily to the flaws of a particular political system, however as a lesson, which focusing events are all about (i.e. learning (Birkland, 2006). One seems to be relying to a certain extent on a reactive process rather than on a proactive process.

This process can be challenging, and even more so the more macro an organization points its focus, but focusing events can and should also be considered as ‘signs.’ A focusing event may be devastating to the individuals involved, but there might

also exist leads within the event as to why it happened, and pointing to the importance, in the case of focusing events to recognize the equilibrium, while not consider it as being 'normal.'

### **Agenda-setting and Sports**

Within the realm of sports, researchers often tie aspects within sports themselves to a larger issue often set by the media such as, steroids in professional football as portrayed by the media (Denham, 1999), where dramatic reports in print and broadcast media can build an agenda. While Denham (2004a) reaction to a former Major League Baseball MVP admitted to a prominent sports magazine (i.e., *Sports Illustrated*) that he used anabolic steroids while playing professional baseball the other examined how mainstream newspaper reports built on the sports magazine investigation and how the issue ultimately affected policy.

Other studies that link sports and agenda-setting consider broadcast strategies related to marketing within professional basketball (NBA) and professional football (NFL) (Fortunato, 2001; 2008), researching racial aspects in the NFL draft as portrayed by the media (Mercurio & Filak, 2010), and purely sports based broadcast media such as ESPN as agenda-setters themselves (Kischefsky, 2011).

As drawn from these examples of research within the world of sports, the ability of the media to address, relate and ultimately spread ideologies in regards to something often viewed as 'anti-political' in terms of sports role among viewers as often seemingly appearing as society's frontier of purity and truth (Sanderson, 2010). However this does not always seem to be so, due to media's ability to naturally, and/or intentionally steer the

conversation and link a given topic to a larger meaning, by default in addressing them and making them relevant to their audience in the first place (Carruthers, 2000; Tian & Stewart, 2005; Sanderson, 2010).

### **The Concussion Debate**

Health issues in football have received football enough attention to the point that United States President Barack Obama stated the following in an interview during the week of the 2013 Super Bowl: “I’m a big football fan, but I have to tell you if I had a son, I’d have to think long and hard before I let him play football. And I think that those of us who love the sport are going to have to wrestle with the fact that it will probably change gradually to try to reduce some of the violence” (Foer & Hughes, 2013). NFL commissioner, Roger Goddell replied to the statement that he (still) considers football to be a safe sport and would personally let his son play football, adding, “I think we’ve seen in the last several decades that players are using their head more than they have in the past. The helmets are better, and they feel safer using their heads. The facemasks. But the reality is, we have to get back to that tackling. Using the shoulders, using the arms properly. And there is a strike zone” (Loumena, 2013).

Laskas (2009) explains the environment of football, the apparent and non-apparent aspects of a game from which a player may or may not develop CTE:

There was a seminal study published by the University of Oklahoma two years ago. They put accelerometers, which measure acceleration, in the helmets of University of Oklahoma players. And they documented the g-force. So we know the g-force for a football player being knocked out is about sixty to ninety g's. To compare, a fighter pilot will pass out at five or six g's, but that's over a long period of time. These football g-forces are just a few milliseconds, very brief—boom! And they found that in the open field, the dramatic cases of a receiver getting blindsided is about one hundred g's. It knocks them out. Very dramatic, everybody sees it. But the linemen? They were actually getting twenty to thirty g's on every play. Because they start out and they bang heads. Every play. (Laskas, 2009).

Arguing that helmets are not the answer, as helmet research and development seems to have increased the last decade, stating: “You've got a face mask that's like a fulcrum sitting out here: You get hit, your head swings around. That's when a lot of these fibers are sheared—by rotation. A helmet can't ever prevent that” (Laskas, 2009).

These current ongoing discussions have increased media coverage and provide a triggering event. Actual real life events provide for a timely analysis and seeks to address the aspects of agenda setting in the media towards health concerns within the NFL, and the recent debates on concussion, head trauma and long-term health challenges among former players that are discovered later in their years of retirement. This research seeks to study what is believed to be the event that triggered this debate, and following media attention, to find out if this was the actual triggering event, or if player safety and concussion awareness is a concern that has existed for a longer time period as been debated and addressed by players and league officials within the NFL as represented in the media. Such a triggering event is relevant to the foundation of this debate due to the

lack of efficacy by the media in basing such a debate on anecdotal evidence. Instead, a triggering event justifies for saliency with regards to the debate and its relevancy on the agenda.

The concept of a concussion was brought to light in the year 900 A.D., when the Persian physician Rhazes introduced this concept to the medical world. Rhazes defined a concussion as a transient impairment of mental status due to a physical butt to the head (Carroll and Rosner, 2011). They argue since that time, the misconception of concussions as being a mild and shortly lived injury would stick with the public (p.11).

A concussion is often defined as a state of temporary unconsciousness caused by a blow, or a jolt to the head, which may also be followed by states of confusion and and/or a sense of incapacity. Among possible incidents, concussions occur frequently during physical activities in sporting events such as, boxing, football, wrestling and ice hockey. However, physical activities have been around for quite longer than the respective sports previously mentioned have existed, and thus, so have concussions. As Carroll and Rosner (2011) point out: “Since even before the first recorded wrestling matches five thousand years ago in Mesopotamia, concussions have been an unavoidable part of sports. Nevertheless, they have remained at once the most common and most confusing of head injuries” (p.10).

In such activities, the head is susceptible to receiving a major or minor blow, in which the brain essentially bounces within the walls of the cranium, causing it to concuss, damaging tissue, causing spots and caulicles of microscopic size on the brain, ultimately having longer term effects than previously believed (Laskas, 2009). Laskas (2009) states

that the brain has play inside the skull, and that the brain is surrounded by cerebral spinal fluid, in which the brain floats. And when the brain stops, the brain continues to travel in the original direction, only to reverberate back with a slight delay.

According to Carroll and Rosner (2011), brain injury specialists have come to an agreement on what constitutes a concussion, which is explained as: “any change in mental status such as confusion, disorientation, headache, or dizziness following a hit or a jolt.” (p.10 – 11). While noting further that a concussion in itself does not require either loss of consciousness or even any action directly towards the head (Carroll and Rosner, 2011).

What makes this form of injury unique seems to lie in the invisible aspect of receiving a concussion. Although one may witness a rough play in a particular sporting event and may conclude that the involved player may have received a concussion based on the nature of the incident, the same type of injury may emerge from something completely unexpected, a minor, unnoticed incident within a similar sporting event, or in form of a relapse (i.e., second-impact syndrome), combining two or more minor instances in which the head has received minor contact (Carroll and Rosner, 2011). Carroll and Rosner (2011) contend that taking such injuries seriously is challenging due to subtle symptoms that seem to pass in a short timeframe.

Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) is defined as “a progressive tauopathy that occurs as a consequence of repetitive mild traumatic brain injury” (A.C. McKee et al., 2012, p.1). CTE is also caused by mild traumatic brain injuries over time (Belson, 2012; A.C. McKee et al., 2012). Historically, CTE was first coined in 1928 by Harrison

Martland, describing the clinical aspects of what he termed “punch drunk” after observing repetitive brain trauma in boxers. CTE was originally termed ‘dementia pugilistica’ as McKee et al. (2012) refer to a study performed by Millspaugh (1937), who recognized that the development seen in CTE occurred in other activities than just boxing, who then preferred the term ‘progressive traumatic encephalopathy’ until the term CTE was fully established.

The characteristics of CTE are associated with symptoms such as: “Irritability, impulsivity, aggression, depression, short term memory loss and heightened suicidality that usually begin 8-10 years after experiencing repetitive mild traumatic brain injury” (McKee et al., 2009). Furthermore, in later stages of CTE, one may mistake CTE for Alzheimer’s disease as well as showing similarities with various forms of dementia while some cases of CTE is linked to motor neuron disease (MND) (McKee et al., 2010; 2012).

In the wake of Webster’s passing, Bennet Omalu did a microscopic study of Webster’s brain and found accumulations of tau protein on the brain in the form of brown and red splotches (Laskas, 2009). The tau protein buildup is described as: “Kind of like sludge, clogging up the works, killing cells in regions responsible for mood, emotions, and executive functioning.” ... “This was why Mike Webster was crazy” (Laskas, 2009).

The Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy (CSTE) under the Boston University School of Medicine established a brain bank in 2008, in which brains and spinal cords that remain after dead athletes, military personnel, and civilians who were known to have experienced TBI in their lives. This allows future study of TBI and CTE, while establishing links between such injuries to diseases such as; Alzheimer’s disease,

Parkinson's disease, frontotemporal lobar degeneration (i.e., FTLTD) and others (McKee et al., 2012).

### **Case at Hand – The Mike Webster Case**

Mike “Iron Mike” Webster played center in the National Football League (NFL) from 1974 to 1990. Over the course of Webster's career he was part of four Super Bowl winning teams, all with the Pittsburgh Steelers, whom he played for his entire career except for his last two seasons. Webster started 245 games during his 17-season NFL career (nfl.com, 2013). He was selected to the NFL all-star game, also known as the Pro Bowl, nine times. Webster retired from football in 1991, and was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1997. In 2002, after more than a decade away from football, at age 50, Webster passed away due to heart failure, listed as the official cause of death; however, doubts toward this cause of death exist (Garber, 2005).

In a 2005 *Sports Illustrated* article, Garber (2005) outlined how neither the NFL nor Webster's doctors learned about the damages done to his head over the course of his career in professional football at least until 1996, six years into Webster's retirement. By that point Webster had left his wife, and was homeless for a period. Webster was known to sleep in the local Greyhound bus stop as a result of several failed business ventures and economic irresponsibility after his retirement from the NFL. During this time he was also inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. In addition Webster “was placed on probation in Beaver County, Pa., after pleading no contest in September 1999 to forging prescriptions to obtain Ritalin, a drug commonly used to treat children with hyperactivity” (Garber, 2005).

Garber (2005) brought to light in his article the impact of how the injuries to Webster's brain were similar to a boxer's. Webster's frontal lobe was damaged from his career in the NFL and doctors said his condition was unable to be cured, not even with surgery. However, this was not learned until 1999 at the earliest, after Webster had been out from playing for almost a decade. Over the same time period Webster's friends and family had noticed a suspicious pattern of behavior, which eventually pointed to the diagnosis established by doctors.

Penn (2013) wrote about the late Junior Seau in a *Gentlemen's Quarterly* article wrote an article titled "The Violent Life and Sudden Death of Junior Seau," the article was based on statements from former players, with whom Seau, a 20-year NFL veteran, had played with or known personally. Like Webster, Seau's life in retirement reflected that of Webster's, "He withdrew from family and friends. He made terrible business decisions. He abused pills. He drank. He gambled away terrifying sums. It was evident to those who knew him well that he was struggling, but no one foresaw his suicide on the morning of May 2, 2012" (Penn, 2013, p. 1).

What is unique about Seau's passing can be seen in the action of committing suicide, pointing a gun intentionally away from his head, to protect the brain for future research, while shooting himself in the chest area. Penn (2013) reflects upon these signs that a player may show during post retirement, coupled with underlying issues linked to CTE (i.e., brain damage):

When a schizophrenic commits suicide, we understand it's his disease that really killed him. But did CTE kill Junior Seau? In the brief period of his life after he retired from pro football, he battled alcoholism, insomnia, prescription-drug abuse, depression, and a gambling addiction. Individually, each has been linked to

CTE, but in combination the cause-and-effect relationships are impossibly tangled (Penn, 2013, p. 2).

Aaron Taylor, a former teammate of Seau's, reflects hegemonic masculine traits (see Messner, 1992). He does this when he explains how men typically keep to themselves about injuries. More specifically men believe in the concept of 'sucking up' about injuries and other forms of negative experiences. Explaining that "It allows us to be good football players, but it slices our throats on the back end, because we use the same tools in this new arena that allowed us to be successful during our careers" (Penn, 2013). Mike Webster however, serves as one of the first examples of a great player passing at a relatively young age due to long-term injuries from the game of football.

Based on the literature review, this study poses the following central hypothesis: Concussions and head injuries in professional football will be mentioned more frequently in news reports following the death of Mike Webster.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHOD

The literature review has shown that much has been written about agenda setting and trigger events. However the existence of the ‘concussion crisis’ (Carrol and Rossner, 2011; Garber, 2005; Laskas, 2009; McKee, et. al., 2012; Omalu, 2008; Schwartz, 2009) lacks research about mass media portrayals. Schreindl (2012) cites Bernhard and Eade (2005) in suggesting that “a study in its infancy” (Schreindl, 2012, p. 75) be conducted in a quantitative manner to open up for other, and perhaps deeper, methodological studies at a later point in time (Schreindl, 2012, p. 105). The current study takes this approach.

Berelson (1952) described content analysis as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (p. 18). Berelson defined two requirements that a proper content analysis should follow: (1) Words and their meanings must actually exist in the text and cannot be inferred, and “the categories of analysis should be defined so precisely that different analysts can apply them to the same body of content and secure the same results” (p. 16); (2) consistency through time, that is, a single coder or a group of coders should produce the same results when they apply the same set of categories to the same content but at different times. Berelson (1952) also separates content analysis from “reading.” To quantify information is, “the extent to which the analytic categories appear in the content, that is the relative emphases and omissions” (Berelson, 1952, p. 17).

To explore the impact of Mike Webster’s death, a content analyzed of print news in *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* was conducted. The study considered

injury reports that appeared after the passing of Webster, and those that appeared one year prior to his 2002 death. A third time period (i.e., 2005 – 2006) was identified as related to Webster's death, due to the empirical affirmations linking brain injury to playing football was released at the time. It was assumed that Webster's death was a triggering event, and that there would be an increase in mentions of head injuries in injury reports as a result of his death.

### **Sample**

This study examined transcripts from U.S. newspapers: *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*.

The unit of measurement was defined as a newspaper that addressed injured player(s) or actions in relation to injuries, reported in the NFL. To be included, items had to be hard-news stories, opinion columns, or editorials. Duplicate articles (e.g., *Associated Press* reports) were not counted beyond the first appearance.

Variables indicated the date, an indicator of media outlet, type of medium, type of report, and then a list of injuries in each article (refer to page 68 for complete coding sheet), to distinguish between reports mentions of injuries and, more specifically, health risks concerning concussions (e.g., CTE, TBI, second impact syndrome). Additionally, indicators were provided if articles mentioned the labor union (NFLPA), 'financial hardship' and/or Mike Webster as they were deemed associated with professional football. As indicated in the literature review, it was assumed that before Webster's death, press reports would focus more on general injuries (e.g., ACL tear, dislocated shoulder, broken fibula) than on head injuries.

Articles were gathered from the ProQuest database and were coded to find patterns in media coverage on injuries over the set time period of three (3) years i.e., one year before Webster's death (September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2001 – September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002), and one year after Webster's death (September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002 - September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2003). Due to Webster's death being initially attributed to heart failure, and evidence of CTE and brain damage being empirically linked to his death in 2005 (Omalu et. al., 2005), a third period was identified and media coverage was analyzed in regards to professional football and injuries around this time period (January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005 – January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006).

ProQuest was used as an alternative to Lexis Nexis due to restrictions going back in time for more than 10 years, which Lexis Nexis has made unavailable. A preliminary search including the term "NFL and injury" in the ProQuest database revealed a total of 2,598 results, 817 of which came during the first time period (2001 – 2002), 881 results during the second time period (2002 – 2003), and 900 within the third time period (2005 – 2006). A stratified sample was used: Please see Sample Stratification (p. 38) for information regarding sample frequency.

Variables included the date, media outlet, type of report, and then a list of injuries in each article (refer to page 68 for complete coding sheet) to observe whether a reported mentioning of injuries, and more specifically health risks, concerning concussions would be associated with professional football with each respective time period. As indicated in the literature review, one might suppose that, before Webster's death, press reports would focus less on head injuries (e.g., concussions, and head trauma) than on injuries toward

the rest of the players' bodies. Each article was coded for the injuries sustained to active or former players at the date of publishing.

Other injuries including, but not limited to, knee injuries, broken legs, muscle related injuries (i.e., forms of strains and/or tears), and tendon related injuries (i.e., forms of strains and/or tears, 'pulled hamstring') were coded within their respective categories (see Chapter IV for further information). These injuries was listed in order of appearance, one mention per injury warrants a 'positive' code. (Se tables 4.0, 4.1, and 4.2 pp. )

Articles were coded by the following time periods: 1 = September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2001 – September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002; 2 = September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002 – September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2003; 3 = January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005 – January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006.

### **Coding Procedure**

This content analysis also is based on Krippendorff's (2004) criteria where 6 criteria have to be met for research to be considered content analysis. Krippendorff's criteria is based on the following test: 1) Which data is analyzed?; 2) how are data defined?; 3) what is the population from which data is drawn?; 4) What is the context relative to the analyzed data?; 5) What are the boundaries of the analysis?; and 6) What is the target of the inferences.

Intercoder reliability is an important aspect of analyzing content analysis data. For this study, one additional researcher was trained to assist in observing reliability within the coded content. Lombard, Synder-Duch and Bracken (2010) state that data retrieved in a study cannot be considered valid if intercoder reliability is not used properly. Lombard

et. al. (2010) point to the establishment of an index, where multiple researchers test for reliability. Intercoder reliability was measured using Holsti's method.

To test intercoder reliability, a second coder was assigned to code 10% of the total sample. A pilot reliability testing was conducted for purposes of training the additional coder. In cases where disagreements occurred, they were compared, contrasted and debated until coders had a mutual understanding of the variables, variable labels, and coding spreadsheet in general. Holsti's method is calculated according to the following formula:  $PA = \frac{2A}{n_1 + n_2}$ .  $PA$  is the proportion agreement observed,  $A$  represents number of agreements between the two coders, while  $n$  is the total number of items coded.  $n_1$  and  $n_2$  are the respective coding decisions by each of the two coders.

(Neuendorff, 2002).

Holsti values are represented as percentages where 1.000 equaling 100%, representing complete intercoder agreement. Krippendorff (2004) set a rule of thumb at above 80% to be good, and 67 – 79% being acceptable. For a comprehensive description of intercoder reliability, refer to table 3.1 (p. 38).

Table 3.1  
Intercoder Reliability of Ten Variables and Holsti Value

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coder 1 decisions</i>	<i>Coder 2 decisions</i>	<i>Agreement</i>	<i>Holsti Value</i>
No Injury Mentioned	51	51	50	0.980
Head	51	51	48	0.941
Neck	51	51	51	1.000
Shoulder	51	51	51	1.000
Arms/Hands	51	51	49	0.960
Torso	51	51	49	0.960
Upper Body Musculature	51	51	49	0.960
Lower Body Musculature	51	51	35	0.686
Knee/Hip	51	51	48	0.941
Ankle/Leg	51	51	41	0.803
Mentioning Concussion	51	51	50	0.980

### Sample Stratification

Time period 1. September 24, 2001 – September 24, 2002 = 817

Time period 2. September 24, 2002 – September 24, 2003 = 881

Time period 3. January 1, 2005 – January 1, 2006 = 900

Total = 2598

Based on the total sample, the stratified sample considered every fourth article, starting with the first article from each time period. Articles that contained information on events other than that of professional football were skipped according to the established frequency of articles to be considered eligible for this study.

817 / 4 = 204

881 / 4 = 220

$$900 / 4 = 225$$

$$\text{Total} = 649$$

### **Frequency**

$$\text{Time period 1} = 31\% (817 / 2598 = 0.314)$$

$$\text{Time period 2} = 34\% (881/2598 = 0.339)$$

$$\text{Time period 3} = 35\% (9900/2598 = 0.346)$$

Despite the data which was based on a preliminary search, the study ultimately considered 496 articles, as articles from news outlets other than those from *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* were eliminated due to an overwhelming amount of articles observed from *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* respectively. In order to do a comparative study between the two, articles from Furthermore, articles that did not contain information in relation to professional football (i.e., the NFL) were skipped by an additional four articles within each time period.

### **Analysis**

The data collected were analyzed using cross-tabulations and chi-square analysis. “A crosstabulation is a joint frequency distribution of cases based on two or more categorical variables” (Michael, n.d., p. 1). Furthermore, a crosstabulation shows each case by their individual distribution and their values on each variable, and is known as ‘contingency table analysis’, and is known to be a commonly used analytic method in the social sciences (Michael, n.d.).

The chi-square statistic (i.e.,  $X^2$ ), was used to determine if the variables in the study were statistically independent or if they are associated to each other (Michael, n.d.).

For the sake of this study, using crosstabulation and the chi-square statistic in SPSS will help determine if the death of Mike Webster increased media coverage of injuries in the NFL.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

A total of 496 articles were coded for ten categorical variables (see table 4.1), from which 180 articles were derived from *The Los Angeles Times*, and 316 articles were derived from *The Washington Post* (see figure 4.1). Articles were divided between time periods, Period 1 = Articles between September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2001 - September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002; Period 2 = September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002 – September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2003; Period 3 = January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005 – January 1<sup>st</sup> 2006. *The Washington Post* accounted for 87 articles in period 1, 109 articles in period 2, and 120 articles in period 3 – 63.7% of the overall sample (see figure 4.1). *The Los Angeles Times* accounted for 66 articles in period 1, 63 articles in period 2, and 51 articles in period 3 – a total of 180 articles, 36% of the overall sample (see figures 4.1; 4.2; 4.3).

Each article was identified by number, date (i.e., month, day, year), period (i.e., 1, 2, or 3), type of article, and by outlet. Each article was read through and coded for mentions of appropriate variables in a designated spreadsheet per time period. Where mentions of variables occurred, the respective variable was coded ‘1’ within the appropriate cell in the spreadsheet. The coded observation warranted for multiple observations of the same variable. Where there were no mentions of a given variable, the cell was coded as ‘0’ in the spreadsheet. One row in the spreadsheet signified one article.

Figure 4.1

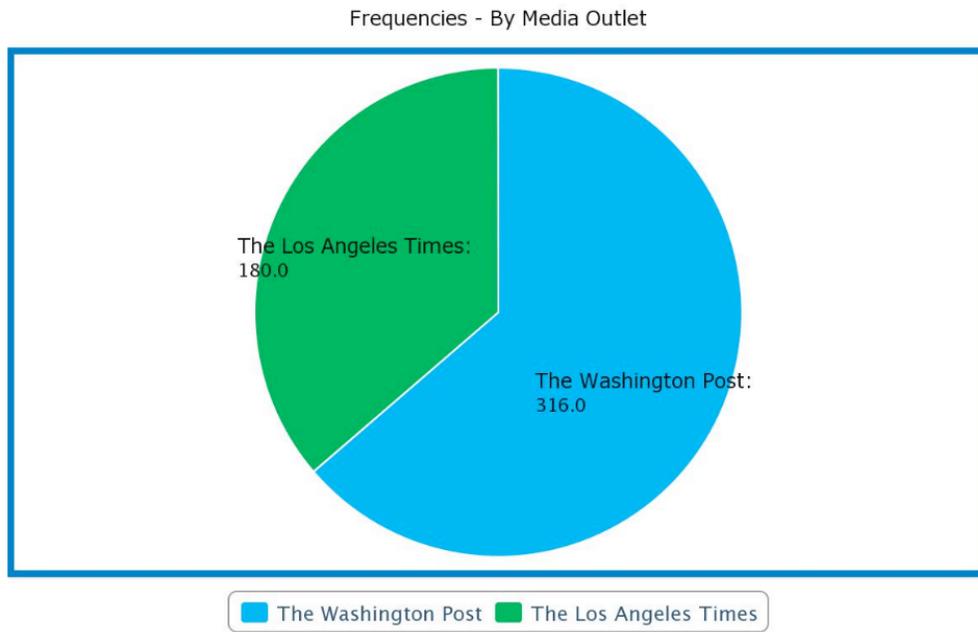


Figure 4.2

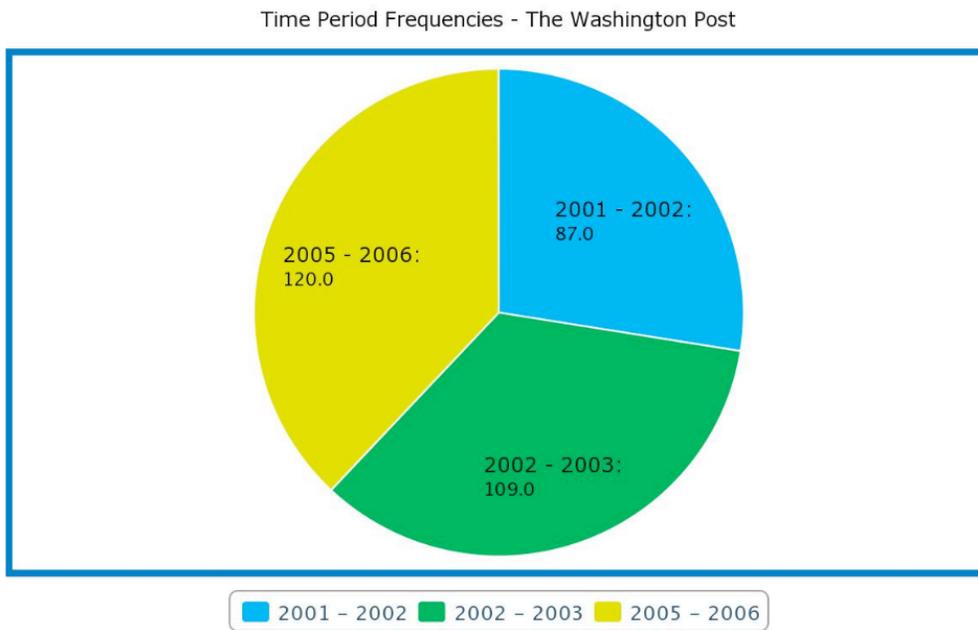
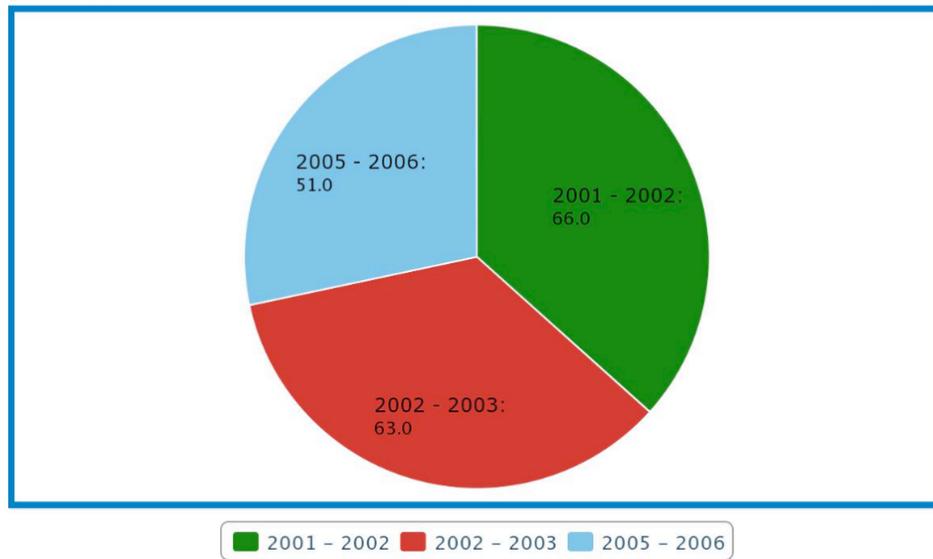


Figure 4.3

Time Period Frequencies - The Los Angeles Times



The percentage values shown in figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 indicate share of overall sample by media outlet (i.e., figure 4.1), amount of articles from *The Washington Post* across time periods in the overall study (i.e., figure 4.2) and amount of articles from *The Los Angeles Times* in the overall study (i.e., figure 4.3). As displayed, figure 4.1 shows that a clear majority of the overall sample derives from *The Washington Post*, although being a larger newspaper, the outlet is also representing a region that includes a dense amount of NFL teams within fairly close vicinity (e.g., *The Washington Redskins*; *The Philadelphia Eagles*; *The Pittsburg Steelers*) in which the *The Los Angeles Times* does not. Despite this, a fair sample was drawn from *The Los Angeles Times*, both outlets are part of a distinct group of national newspaper outlets involved in setting, building and maintaining the agenda (Griffin, 2008)

As far as reported injuries are concerned, 'head injuries' were represented with 23 mentions (4.6%) in the overall sample. 7 mentions (4.6%) occurred in period 1, 14 mentions (8.1%) occurred in period 2, and 2 mentions (1.2%) occurred within period 3. 'Neck injuries' were represented with 33 mentions (6.7%) in the overall sample. 12 mentions (7.8%) occurred in period 1, 11 mentions (6.4%) occurred in period 2, and 10 mentions (5.8%) occurred within period 3. Shoulder injuries were mentioned 86 times (17.3%) in the overall sample. With 26 mentions (17.0%) occurring within period 1, 30 mentions (17.4%) occurring within period 2, and 30 mentions (17.5%) occurring within period 3. 'Arms/Hands' were mentioned 67 times (13.5%) in the overall sample. From which 22 mentions (14.4%) occurred in period 1, 33 mentions (19.2%) occurring in period 2, and 12 mentions (7.0%) occurring in period 3. 'Torso' was also coded for, which occurred with 62 mentions (12.5%) in the overall sample. From which 17 mentions (11.1%) occurred within period 1, 20 mentions (11.6%) occurred in period 2, and 25 mentions (14.6%) occurred in period 3.

Mentions of 'upper body musculature' occurred in 28 instances (5.6%) in the overall sample, with 10 mentions (6.5%) in period 1, 7 mentions (4.1%) in period 2, and 11 mentions (6.4%) in period 3. Mentions of 'lower body musculature' in 104 instances (21.0%) in the overall sample, whereas 29 mentions (19.0%) in period 1, 31 mentions (18.0%) in period 2, and 44 mentions (25.7%) in period 3. Mentions of 'knee/hip' occurred in 179 instances within the overall sample, 55 mentions (35.9%) of which occurred in period 1, 66 mentions (38.4%) in period 2, and 58 mentions (33.9%) in

period 3. ‘Ankle/leg/foot’ was mentioned 150 times (30.2%) within the overall sample, 33 mentions (21.6%) occurred in period 1, 44 mentions (25.6%) in period 2, and 73 mentions (42.7%) in period 3. Lastly, mentions of ‘concussion’ occurred 27 times (5.4%) within the overall sample, 9 mentions (5.9%) in period 1, 10 mentions (5.8%) in period 2, and 8 mentions (4.7%) in period 3 (see table 4.1 for comprehensive list).

Table 4.1  
Article Frequencies of Ten Categorical Variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Overall</i>	<i>Period 1</i>	<i>Period 2</i>	<i>Period 3</i>
Head**	23 (4.6%)	7 (4.6%)	14 (8.1%)	2 (1.2%)
Neck	33 (6.7%)	12 (7.8%)	11 (6.4%)	10 (5.8%)
Shoulder	86 (17.3%)	26 (17.0%)	30 (17.4%)	30 (17.5%)
Arms/Hands*	67 (13.5%)	22 (14.4%)	33 (19.2%)	12 (7.0%)
Torso/Back	62 (12.5%)	17 (11.1%)	20 (11.6%)	25 (14.6%)
Upper body musculature	28 (5.6%)	10 (6.5%)	7 (4.1%)	11 (6.4%)
Lower body musculature	104 (21.0%)	29 (19.0%)	31 (18.0%)	44 (25.7%)
Knee/Hip	179 (36.1%)	55 (35.9%)	66 (38.4%)	58 (33.5%)
Ankle/Leg/Foot***	150 (30.2%)	33 (21.6%)	44 (25.6%)	73 (42.7%)
Mentioning concussion	27 (5.4%)	9 (5.9%)	10 (5.8%)	8 (4.7%)

\*\*\* =  $p < .001$  \*\* =  $p < .01$  \*  $p < .05$

### Frequency of Injury Mentions by News Outlet

From a news outlet perspective, as seen in table 4.2, within period 1, *The Washington Post* mentioned ‘head injuries’ 5 times (5.7%). ‘Neck injuries’ were mentioned 4 times (4.6%). ‘Shoulder injuries’ were mentioned on 11 occurrences (12.6%). Injuries to ‘Arms/hands’ was mentioned 12 times (13.8%). ‘Torso’ was mentioned 9 times (10.3%). ‘Upper body musculature’ was mentioned 3 times (3.4%). ‘Lower body musculature’ was mentioned on 13 occasions (14.9%). ‘Knee/hip’ was

mentioned 29 times (33.3%). ‘Ankle/leg/foot’ was mentioned 21 times (24.1%), and ‘concussion’ was mentioned 6 times (6.9%).

Within period 2, *The Washington Post* mentioned ‘head injuries’ 8 times (7.3%). ‘Neck injuries’ were mentioned 8 times (7.3%). ‘Shoulder injuries’ were mentioned on 22 occurrences (20.2%). Injuries to ‘Arms/hands’ was mentioned 16 times (14.7%). ‘Torso’ was mentioned 9 times (8.3%). ‘Upper body musculature’ was mentioned 4 times (3.7%). ‘Lower body musculature’ was mentioned on 21 occasions (19.3%). ‘Knee/hip’ was mentioned 46 times (42.2%). ‘Ankle/leg/foot’ was mentioned 24 times (22.0%), and ‘concussion’ was mentioned 6 times (5.5%).

Within period 3, *The Washington Post* mentioned ‘head injuries’ 0 times (0.0%). ‘Neck injuries’ were mentioned 5 times (4.2%). ‘Shoulder injuries’ were mentioned on 20 occurrences (16.7%). Injuries to ‘Arms/hands’ was mentioned 9 times (7.5%). ‘Torso’ was mentioned 15 times (12.5%). ‘Upper body musculature’ was mentioned 8 times (6.7%). ‘Lower body musculature’ was mentioned on 33 occasions (27.5%). ‘Knee/hip’ was mentioned 47 times (39.2%). ‘Ankle/leg/foot’ was mentioned 54 times (45.0%), and ‘concussion’ was mentioned 6 times (5.0%).

As far as the sample regarding *The Washington Post* is concerned overall, the following are mentions by injury, followed by respective percentages: ‘Head injuries’ was mentioned 13 times (7.2%). ‘Neck injury’ was mentioned 17 times (9.4%). ‘Shoulder’ was mentioned 53 times (29.4%). ‘Arms/Hands’ was mentioned 37 times (20.5%). ‘Torso/back’ was mentioned 33 times (18.3%). ‘Upper body musculature’ was mentioned 15 times (8.3%). ‘Lower body musculature’ was mentioned 67 times (37.2%). ‘Knee/hip’

was mentioned 122 times (67.7%). ‘Ankle/leg/foot’ was mentioned 99 times (55.0%).

‘Concussion’ was mentioned 18 times (10.0%). For comprehensive list of data, see table

4.2.

Table 4.2  
Article Frequencies and Injury Mentions by News Outlet – *The Washington Post*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Overall</i>	<i>Period 1</i>	<i>Period 2</i>	<i>Period 3</i>
Head	13 (7.2%)	5 (5.7%)	8 (7.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Neck	17 (9.4%)	4 (4.6%)	8 (7.3%)	5 (4.2%)
Shoulder	53 (29.4%)	11 (12.6%)	22 (20.2%)	20 (16.7%)
Arms/Hands	37 (20.55%)	12 (13.8%)	16 (14.7%)	9 (7.5%)
Torso/Back	33 (18.3%)	9 (10.3%)	9 (8.3%)	15 (12.5%)
Upper body musculature	15 (8.3%)	3 (3.4%)	4 (3.7%)	8 (6.7%)
Lower body musculature	67 (37.2%)	13 (14.9%)	21 (19.3%)	33 (27.5%)
Knee/hip	122 (67.7%)	29 (33.3%)	46 (42.2%)	47 (39.2%)
Ankle/leg/foot	99 (55.0%)	21 (24.1%)	24 (22.0%)	54 (45.0%)
Mentioning concussion	18 (10.0%)	6 (6.9%)	6 (5.5%)	6 (5.0%)

As seen in table 4.3, *The Los Angeles Times* mentioned the following within period 1: ‘Head injuries’ 2 times (3.0%). ‘Neck injuries’ were mentioned 8 times (12.1%). ‘Shoulder injuries’ were mentioned 15 times (22.7%). Injuries to ‘Arms/hands’ was mentioned 10 times (15.2%). ‘Torso’ was mentioned 8 times (12.1%). ‘Upper body musculature’ was mentioned 7 times (10.6%). ‘Lower body musculature’ was mentioned on 16 occurrences (24.2%). ‘Knee/hip’ was mentioned 26 times (39.4%). ‘Ankle/leg/foot’ was mentioned 12 times (18.2%), and ‘concussion’ was mentioned 3 times (4.5%).

Within period 2, *The Los Angeles Times* mentioned ‘head injuries’ 6 times (9.5%). ‘Neck injuries’ were mentioned 3 times (4.8%). ‘Shoulder injuries’ were

mentioned on 8 occurrences (12.7%). Injuries to ‘Arms/hands’ was mentioned 17 times (27.0%). ‘Torso’ was mentioned 11 times (17.5%). ‘Upper body musculature’ was mentioned 3 times (4.8%). ‘Lower body musculature’ was mentioned 10 times (15.9%). ‘Knee/hip’ was mentioned 20 times (31.7%). ‘Ankle/leg/foot’ was mentioned 20 times (31.7%), and ‘concussion’ was mentioned 4 times (6.3%).

Within period 3, *The Los Angeles Times* mentioned ‘head injuries’ 2 times (3.9%). ‘Neck injuries’ were mentioned 5 times (9.8%). ‘Shoulder injuries’ were mentioned on 10 occurrences (19.6%). Injuries to ‘Arms/hands’ were mentioned 3 times (5.9%). ‘Torso’ was mentioned 10 times (19.6%). ‘Upper body musculature’ was mentioned 3 times (5.9%). ‘Lower body musculature’ was mentioned on 11 occurrences (21.6%). ‘Knee/hip’ was mentioned 11 times (21.6%). ‘Ankle/leg/foot’ was mentioned 19 times (37.3%), and ‘concussion’ was mentioned 2 times (3.9%).

As far as the sample regarding *The Los Angeles Times* is concerned overall, the following are mentions by injury, followed by respective percentages: ‘Head injuries’ was mentioned 10 times (5.5%). ‘Neck injury’ was mentioned 16 times (8.8%). ‘Shoulder’ was mentioned 23 times (12.7%). ‘Arms/Hands’ was mentioned 30 times (16.6%). ‘Torso/back’ was mentioned 29 times (16.1%). ‘Upper body musculature’ was mentioned 13 times (7.2%). ‘Lower body musculature’ was mentioned 37 times (20.5%). ‘Knee/hip’ was mentioned 57 times (31.6%). ‘Ankle/leg/foot’ was mentioned 51 times (28.3%). ‘Concussion’ was mentioned 9 times (5.0%). For comprehensive list of data, see table 4.3 (p. 49).

Table 4.3  
Article Frequencies and Injury Mentions by News Outlet – *The Los Angeles Times*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Overall</i>	<i>Period 1</i>	<i>Period 2</i>	<i>Period 3</i>
Head	10 (5.5%)	2 (3.0%)	6 (9.5%)	2 (3.9%)
Neck	16 (8.8%)	8 (12.1%)	3 (4.8%)	5 (9.8%)
Shoulder	23 (12.7%)	15 (22.7%)	8 (12.7%)	10 (19.6%)
Arms/Hands	30 (16.6%)	10 (15.2%)	17 (27.0%)	3 (5.9%)
Torso/Back	29 (16.1%)	8 (12.1%)	11 (17.5%)	10 (19.6%)
Upper body musculature	13 (7.2%)	7 (10.6%)	3 (4.8%)	3 (5.9%)
Lower body musculature	37 (20.5%)	16 (24.2%)	10 (15.9%)	11 (21.6%)
Knee/hip	57 (31.6%)	26 (39.4%)	20 (31.7%)	11 (21.6%)
Ankle/leg/foot	51 (28.3%)	12 (18.2%)	20 (31.7%)	19 (37.3%)
Mentioning concussion	9 (5%)	3 (4.5%)	4 (6.3%)	2 (3.9%)

Due to very few observed frequencies among some variables, they were not further considered as a part of this study. Missing variables include: ‘mentions brain disease’, ‘mentions Mike Webster’, ‘mentioning financial hardship’, ‘mentioning NFLPA’, ‘mentioning concussion’, ‘mentioning labor union’.

‘Injury undisclosed’ was coded for, but is missing from the reported variables due to several reasons. 1) Not having great relevance toward the study, 2) can be interpreted loosely, 3) experienced low frequency of agreement in terms of intercoding reliability (Holsti value = 0.490).

Ultimately, this means that Hypothesis One was supported. It predicted that concussions and head injuries in professional football are more often portrayed by the media after the death of Mike Webster. The study found limited support for the increase in mentions of ‘concussions’, but found an increase in occurrences of ‘head injuries’ being mentioned after the death of Mike Webster.

Among occurrences of 'head injury', 7 mentions occurred during period 1, while the following occurred across the scope of periods 2 and 3 of the study, identified by date parenthesis. Period 2: (1) – September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003; (2) – September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003; (3) – August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2003; (4) – August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2003; (5) – August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003; (6) – August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2003; (7) – August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2003; (8) – January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2003; (9) – December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2002; (10) – December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002; (11) – November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2002; (12) – November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2002; (13) – November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002; (14) – September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2002.

Period 3: (1) – November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005; (2) – March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

These findings suggest that mentions in regards to 'head injury' experienced a significant increase between period 1 and period 2 ( $X^2 = 9.422$ ,  $n = 23$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .01$ , *Cramer's V* = .138).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

This thesis began with a discussion of scholarly and professional literature, considering the notion of a trigger event (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005; Birkland, 2007) puncturing the current equilibrium (i.e., status quo), thus ‘grabbing’ or taking up limited agenda space (Dearing & Rogers, 1996), becoming the ‘new’ or current status quo (McCombs, 2004). As discussed, agenda setting theory (McCombs, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) is a strong theoretical framework within the field of communications and mass media research, and provided theoretical grounding for this study to apply the theoretical framework of trigger events, punctuated equilibrium and the agenda setting theory to the ongoing, public discussions related to head trauma and concussions in professional football.

The central research hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>) predicted that concussions and head injuries in professional football would be mentioned more frequently by the media after the death of Mike Webster. The study found limited support for increase in ‘concussion’ mentions, and found an increase in mentions of ‘head injuries’ after the death of Mike Webster. Overall ‘head injuries’ saw close to a 100% increase between period 1 (4.6% n = 7) and period 2 (8.1%, n = 14). Furthermore, while *The Washington Post* had the largest sample in the study (n = 316), *The Los Angeles Times* (n = 180), increased mentions of ‘head injuries’ with disparity between period 1 (3.0%, n = 2) and period 2 (9.5%, n = 6), than *The Washington Post*. Despite the slight difference in mentions during period 2, both

outlets shared the same tendency having significant drops during period 3. *The Los Angeles Times* = 3.9%, n = 2. *The Washington Post* = 0.0%, n = 0.

As far as period 2 is considered, the findings overall, met research expectations in terms of significance ( $X^2 = 9.422$ ,  $n = 23$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .01$ , *Cramer's V* = .138), however a denser population in terms of mentions were also expected to be observed.

## **Theoretical Implications**

### **Agenda-Setting Theory**

Agenda-setting theory developed by McCombs & Shaw (1972) suggests that what is portrayed by the news media as important will be regarded as important by consumers of the respective mediums. McCombs (2004) states that agenda-setting is not simply a theory in which audience members are considered 'empty minded drones', simply waiting to be programmed by a news outlet. Rather, according to McCombs, "Agenda-setting does assign a central role to the news media in initiating items for the public agenda. Or, to paraphrase Lippmann, the information provided by the news media plays a key role in the construction of our pictures of reality" (p. 6). Furthermore, McCombs (2004) suggests the set of information, on a complete stage, provided by news media, aggregates the creation of such images.

Dearing and Rogers (1996) explain 'the agenda' as issues rising or falling on the public agenda, or competing with one another over attention to help determine the position of the issue on the agenda. This occurs at the expense of other issues on the agenda. Which is also referred to as the zero-sum game of agenda setting (Zhu, 1992).

Furthermore, issues can be regarded as either obtrusive or unobtrusive. Suggesting that individuals may not rely solely on news media for information regarding ‘news’, but will also rely on their social networks (e.g., family, friends, coworkers) to evaluate the urgency, importance or relevance of the observed ‘news’ information. In any case, the most salient form of influence will vary depending on each topic (McCombs, 2004). Unobtrusive events are known as issues in which the average audience member (i.e. to that of mediated news information) has less direct experience with in their daily lives. While obtrusive issues are thus, issues that obtrude (i.e., become noticeable) in our daily lives. Most audience members can relate to these issues through other dominant sources of information than solely relying on the media. Obtrusive issues may be local crime, traffic issues, grocery prices and inflation in the economy (see McCombs, 2004, p. 61, box 4.3).

This study considered the coverage of injuries pertaining to professional football after the death of Mike Webster as unobtrusive events. Arguing that the devout fan is dependent on media consumption to closely follow professional football. While also arguing the lack of first hand experiences from the environment of professional football among the general population provides grounding for professional sports injuries as being unobtrusive (see p. 18 for further detail). This study builds on previous agenda-setting research by Denham (1999), where it was concluded that an inoperable brain lymphoma in Lyle Alzado, a retired NFL player at the time, was attributed to anabolic steroid usage throughout his career. It’s appearance in a Sports Illustrated feature article, as a trigger

event, helped set the agenda for media portrayals of anabolic steroid usage (i.e., and ‘doping’) in sports.

### **Triggering Events**

This study considered scholarship from an interdisciplinary perspective, as it combined theoretical frameworks mainly from the field of communication research, but also looked to theories in which the fields of communication research and political science intersect. Dearing and Rogers (1996) state, “a better understanding of the agenda-setting process lies at the intersection of mass communication research and political science, as agenda-setting can directly affect policy” (p. 4). They define an issue, such as a social problem, often as one pertaining to conflict, and is receiving media coverage and/or attention. Proponents on either side of a social problem, for instance child abuse, do not battle over whether or not it is good or bad, the proponents in such cases battle over how to solve the agreed-upon social problem (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). This perspective also corresponded with this study, due to the contention that nobody wants to see football players laying lifeless on the field, nor know that they might not fare well after they walk of the field for the very last time.

The attribute saliency in triggering events, such as the death of Mike Webster, lies in its human element. Triggering events can vary in scale, however, the given event is deemed to trigger a response from the agenda, its gatekeepers as “trigger events play a dominant role in putting and issue on the U.S. media agenda” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 91), while Manning (2001) points out the presence of a human interest approach lying within the notion of a trigger event, as opposed to that of a real world indicator. The

death of Mike Webster was considered a triggering event in this study due to its humanistic aspect of a public figure passing away prematurely at the age of only 50 years old. Mike Webster's welfare while in retirement from playing football was well known in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area, where he continued to live after his playing days (Garber, 2005).

### **Concussions in Football**

Although concussions have been a recognized phenomena since the year 900 A.D. (Carroll & Rosner, 2011), and are debated within a multitude of fields, ranging from car racing, to military, to other sports (Dewey, 2013; Gift, 2014). Despite this, the occurrence of concussions among football players leads the debate on concussions in sports (Omalu, 2008; Foer & Hughes, 2013; Loumena, 2013). Empirical research has provided scientific evidence for the occurrence of CTE in retired players (McKee et. al., 2012; Omalu et. al., 2005). As a result of the ongoing discussion, its presence on the media and public agenda, the CDC has officially deemed concussions in sports an epidemic (Degutis, 2012). Thus, the NFL is engaging in, what perhaps would be their biggest fight for survival (Loumena, 2013; Petchesky, 2014) as parents are less convinced in regards to their children playing football (Fainaru & Fainaru-Wada, 2013).

The triggering event in the present study, and its agenda-setting attributes linked to the concussion debate surrounding the game of football can be argued to have provided leverage for other, emerging discourses surrounding the game as well, that may or may not have never seen light, if the 'concussion crisis' was not already on 'the agenda': Professional football players that have come forward, reporting to 'walk away' from the

game, in, or near their prime (Belson, 2013; Mendenhall, 2014); As well as debates surrounding Missouri defensive end, Michael Sam, the first player to announce he is gay prior to the NFL draft (Branch, 2014; Walder, 2014).

### **Limitations**

There are limitations to this study. First, the sample was only across two outlets within one medium. Although *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* are considered being part of an elite group of newspaper outlets that ‘set’ (e.g., or maintain) the agenda for other outlets (Griffin, 2008), a limitation to this study lies in its lack of diversity among outlets. Furthermore, the lack of other forms of media (i.e., magazines, television), also limits the study.

### **Future Research**

Within the scope of this study, opportunities for future research is strongly believed to be plentiful. Since 2005, the concussion debate has gained its presence on the public agenda, and thus several avenues of research may be applied to topics surrounding concussions, the debate, how the debate is portrayed, and ultimately, what policies might be implemented due to its presence on the public agenda? (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Some of the above ideas or suggestions are not feasible at this time, attesting to the future that is believed this research will most likely approach.

In terms of similar studies to the study herein, it will be recommended that future research consider a more diverse medium population, rather than a greater number of variables and/or data. Time periods should also be considered, as a longitudinal study is also recommended to consider ‘agenda-building’ (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs,

2004) properties of the mainstream media. Time periods should in that case be considered in relation to key events within the ongoing debate. Also, studies should also consider/expand by researching this phenomenon in other levels of football play (e.g., high-school and college football).

Hopefully, this study will be considered as a step towards examining trigger events, mass media; its agenda-setting attributes, as related to today's concussion debate concerning current and former professional football players and ultimately the future of football.

## **Conclusion**

The death of a highly regarded, although retired NFL player in Mike Webster, and in the case of doctors' failure in attributing cause of death at first (Garber, 2005), is relevant in terms of today's concussion debate, including fairly recent discussions relating to the players labor union, collective bargaining agreements, and the players disability fund, as Webster is known as the first death in the NFL attributed to a head injury sustained throughout his playing career (Omalu, et. al. 2005).

This study argues then that from a journalistic perspective, the death of Mike Webster triggered attention among journalists, that this is a phenomenon both relevant and of great enough importance, to consider its position on 'the agenda' as it can be argued from this standpoint that this triggering event helped garner enough media attention, to the point where several, emerging discourses, that has yet to be discussed surrounding the game of football.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Coding Sheet

##### Period

1 = Before Webster's death (September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2001 – September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002)

2 = After Webster's death (September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002 - September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2003)

3 = 2005 - 2006 (January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005 – January 1<sup>st</sup> 2006)

##### Date

- Month
- Day
- Year

##### Outlet Type

1. Newspaper
2. Magazine
3. Broadcast Segment (Transcript)

##### Type of Article

1. News
2. Op. ed.
3. Editorial
4. Portrait/Documentary

##### Outlet Identification

1. The New York Times (NYT)
2. The Washington Post (WP)
3. Los Angeles Times (LAT)
4. USA Today (UST)
5. Chicago Tribune (CT)
6. The Dallas Morning News (DMN)
7. The Wall Street Journal (TWS)
8. Sports Illustrated (SI)
9. Time Magazine (TM)
10. Newsweek (NW)

#### Injuries Mentioned

#### No Mention

0 = No

1 = Yes

#### Head

0 = No

1 = Yes

#### Neck

0 = No

1 = Yes

#### Shoulder(s)

0 = No

1 = Yes

Arms/Hands

0 = No

1 = Yes

Torso (i.e., ribs/spine/organs – e.g., “herniated disc”)

0 = No

1 = Yes

Knee(s)/Hip(s)

0 = No

1 = Yes

Ankle/Foot/ Leg

0 = No

1 = Yes

Upper body musculature

0 = No

1 = Yes

Lower body musculature

0 = No

1 = Yes

Undisclosed Injury

0 = No

1 = Yes

Mentions Brain Disease

0 = No

1 = Yes

Mentioning Webster

0 = No

1 = Yes

Mentioning financial hardship of players

0 = No

1 = Yes

Mentioning Players Association

0 = No

1 = Yes

Mentioning Concussion

0 = No

1 = Yes

Mentioning Labor Union

0 = No

1 = Yes

Mentioning Injury

0 = No

1 = Yes

Number Sequence (Every 4<sup>th</sup> article)

1      21    45

5      25    49

9      29    53

13     33    57

17     41    61

- Note: If article pertains to non NFL content (i.e., mentioning “NFL” anecdotally, but including content about events such as but not limited to: US Masters (golf), College Football, Tennis; the coder will skip another four articles. This may also occur several articles in a row.