Race and Crime in Sports Media: Content Analysis on the Michael Vick and Ben Roethlisberger Cases

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Between 2007 and 2009 a prominent black and white National Football League (NFL) quarterback was implicated in violent criminal activity. This paper looks at how ABC, CBS and Fox News portrayed the cases of Michael Vick and Ben Roethlisberger. Not only did these outlets dedicate far more content to Vick’s case, but there also emerged the theme that his behavior reflected a subculture of violence more so than did Roethlisberger’s.

From the summer of 2007 to the summer of 2009, Michael Vick and Ben Roethlisberger, two prominent National Football League (NFL) starting quarterbacks, were implicated in violent criminal activity. While the players differ in playing style and achievements, race represents perhaps the greatest distinction between the two.

This paper examines transcripts from ABC, CBS, and Fox News to measure how the networks portrayed each player in his criminal case. While the nature of the crimes, judicial outcomes, and other intervening factors contribute to the media’s portrayal of the two men, I believe that race played an important role. In line with Heider’s (2000) concept of “incognito racism”, which purports that news production and the attitudes of its workers influence content in a manner that proves unfavorable to blacks, I hypothesize that because Michael Vick is black he received greater scrutiny and more unfavorable content than Ben Roethlisberger, who is white.

The news represents an ideal medium for understanding perceptions on race and crime because of its influence on public opinion and because it is a primary source of information for many Americans (Dixon & Linz, 2000). In influencing perceptions and attitudes race represents a salient factor for viewers (Gilens, 1996). With respect to crime news, Hall and colleagues (1978) contend that it reflects society’s shared values. Research suggests that racially discriminatory content presents a social dilemma as the overwhelming presence of blacks as perpetrators can lead viewers to perceive them as being more dangerous (Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright,
This finding resonates with research on crime alerts that shows that racial stereotypes arise when race is mentioned in the alert (Akalis, Banaji, & Kosslyn, 2008). Entman and Rojecki’s (2000) analysis of network news suggests that studying the relationship between race, crime, sports, and the media is pertinent. They show that blacks appeared between three and four times as much in stories on crime or sports in comparison to whites (p. 66). Thus, there is reason to believe that the media might magnify the criminality of black athletes, like Michael Vick.

I prefer televised news to print media because the former’s content is not as thoroughly reviewed prior to being presented to the public. While much of televised news is scripted, live broadcasting allows for automatic responses or reactions that better represent commentators’ true beliefs. There exists a wealth of research indicating that individuals’ implicit attitudes on race and other social matters might contrast from what they report in surveys (or, perhaps write in a newspaper article) (Fazio & Olsen, 2003; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; McConnell & Leibold, 2001). While it is difficult to understand how these implicit attitudes affect actual behavior, it is relevant for live newscasts where commentators possess little time to filter their actual attitudes.

Not to mention, Entman and Rojecki’s (2000) analysis of video and print media found that race is far more salient on television for individuals associated with criminal activity (p. 89). Thus, considering the media’s powerful influence on individual’s beliefs with respect to government and public programs (Entman, 2004; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Winter, 2008), its portrayal of two prominent athletes implicated in crime presumably also impacts the public’s perceptions on race.

Chong and Druckman (2007) state that framing theory “refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or orient their thinking about an issue (p. 104)”. Similarly, Scheufle and Tewksbury (2007) argue that the media creates framing effects based on how it characterizes a story and how that influences the audience’s perception of the content. Therefore, the media’s portrayal of these two prominent quarterbacks implicated in crime might emphasize and reiterate existing racial stereotypes, such as a historical racist belief that pairs black physicality with violence and criminality (King and Springwood, 2005).

In the following I present a literature review on race and the sports media with a brief synopsis of the various forms of racial discrimination in athletics. Next, I address my methods, and I close with the results and a discussion of my findings and limitations to the study.

But, a question remains—why sports? Why Vick and Roethlisberger?
Presumably, because of blacks’ undeniable success in professional and collegiate athletics over the last 70 years, sports represents the one media environment where blacks are most likely to receive neutral—if not preferential—treatment. Thus, if black athletes encounter racial discrimination from media in a profession that they dominate then we can expect racial discrimination to be magnified in other social arenas where blacks are underrepresented or disadvantaged.²

**Racial Discrimination in Sports**

Despite their high number in major collegiate and professional sports, black athletes and sports’ professionals encounter discrimination in myriad forms. For example, compensatory discrimination is well-documented in the National Basketball Association (NBA) (Hamilton, 1997; Kahn, 1991; Kahn & Shah, 2005), Major League Baseball (MLB) (Lapchick, 1991), and the NFL (Kahn, 1992). Collegiately, Edwards (1980) discusses the irony of black student athletes disproportionately receiving scholarships in high revenue sports, like football and basketball that support low revenue sports dominated by white student athletes. Across sports, evidence of stacking, or the assigning of player’s to certain race-specific positions,³ exists in MLB (Margolis & Piliavin, 1999; Smith & Seff, 1989), college football (Hawkins, 2002), English Soccer (Melnick, 1988), and the NFL (Eitzen & Sanford, 1975).

There is also evidence of structural discrimination in sports. For example, studies show that blacks are disproportionately underrepresented in coaching and management positions considering the high number of black athletes in the sports (Coakley, 2004; Eitzen, 2006), that black professional basketball players receive more fouls and score fewer points when white referees call the game (Price & Wolfers, 2007), and that professional sports’ leagues implement structural rules that penalize black culture (Simons, 2003). At the individual-level, black athletes and their family members encounter in-game explicit racism (Lawrence, 2005; Spencer, 2004), and black college athletes reports greater feelings of exploitation than do white players (Leonard II, 1986).

But, it’s not just coaches and organizations that practice discrimination as evidence of customer discrimination is prevalent (Hamilton, 1997; Kahn, 1991). Kahn and Sherer (1988) show that in one NBA season replacing a black player with an identical white player increased attendance between 8,000 and 13,000 fans. Similarly, Kanazawa and Funk (2001) found that one white NBA player adds anywhere from $2,600 to $27,200 in television commercial revenue per game. In the 1980–81 season, Lapchick (1991) reports that over...
half of Philadelphia 76er fans preferred to watch white players; other research measuring the relationship between attendance and the race of athletes supports this finding (Brown, Spiro, & Kennan, 1991; Koch & Vander Hill, 1988; Sully, 1974). At a more macro-level, Karabel and Karen (1982), and Burdekin and Idson (1991) find a positive relationship between a team’s racial composition reflecting that of their franchise city and attendance.

Of course, it should come as no surprise that with respect to achievement, the literature illustrates that racial discrimination adversely affected winning in MLB (Gwartney & Haworth, 1974; Leonard, Pine, & Rice, 1988), English soccer (Szymanksi, 2000), the NBA (Johnson & Marple, 1973; Brown, Spiro, & Keenan, 1991) and collegiate athletics (Goff, McCormick, & Tollison, 2002).

Race, Sports, Crime and the Media

Instances of traditional and subtle racism occur periodically in the sports media. On Nightline Al Campanis argued that blacks lack inherent managerial necessities in baseball (Aldridge, 1987); sportscaster Jimmy “the Greek” Snyder claimed that blacks possessed a biological superiority to white athletes because of forced breeding patterns during slavery (Solomon, 1988); commentator Billy Packard compared basketball star Allen Iverson to a “tough monkey” (Weiss, 1996); and, then ESPN-commentator Rush Limbaugh claimed that the media exhibited undue preference toward black athletes because the media wanted to see them succeed (Sandomir, 2003).

Much of the research on race, sports, and the media addresses how the media emphasizes black athletes’ physicality in contrast to white athletes’ intelligence and cognitive acumen (Lavelle, 2010; McCarthy & Jones, 1997), and how viewers perceive such stereotyping (McCarthy, Jones, & Potrac, 2003). In other research on the sports media, Bruce (2004) showed that commentators were more likely to call minority athletes by their first names with the exception of elite athletes, like Michael Jordan. Rainville and McCormick (1977) found that white athletes receive greater praise than similar black athletes, and Wilson (1997) illustrated how news coverage and promotional segments on the Toronto Raptors basketball team served to portray black players as “good” or “bad”.

King and Springwood (2005) identify two examples where black athletes received harsher media treatment than white athletes for assault on women. In the first, two University of Nebraska football players, one white and one black, were charged with assaulting white girlfriends. King and Springwood argue that the white player, Christian Peter, who was
convicted for his assault, garnered much less media attention than the black player, Lawrence Philips. In the second example they cite Lapchick’s analysis of athletes involved in alleged sexual assaults between 1988 and 1990. Although white athletes were responsible for 21 of the 30 cases, when black athletes were the focus of such the investigation, race becomes the predominant issue in the media (p. 197). Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research on race, crime, athletes, and the media. As such, I turn to the broader literature on race, crime and the media.

In his paper on young men of color in the media, Entman (2006) argues that “the media are among the most powerful sources of mental impressions that people form of categories of out-groups (p. 5).” This is troubling considering that studies of the news show that blacks are twice as likely as whites to experience unfavorable pretrial publicity (Dixon & Linz, 2002), that among felons blacks were almost two times as likely as whites to be shown as perpetrators (Dixon & Linz, 2000), and that young black men are dehumanized and often portrayed as threatening (Welch, Price, & Yankey, 2002).

Romer, Jamieson, and De Coteau (1998) found that blacks are significantly more likely to be shown as perpetrators than as victims. Similarly, Dixon, Azocar, and Casas (2003) determined that blacks are underrepresented as victims and law enforcers. These findings echo Gilens’ (1996) analysis of television and print media, which indicates that blacks are overwhelmingly associated with “unsympathetic” groups of the poor, like unemployed working age adults.

However, the above research focuses on the media’s relationship with individuals likely of limited means and largely inconspicuous to the public, characteristics Vick and Roethlisberger don’t share. Thus, higher-profile individuals might receive different treatment because of their notoriety. But, even among elites research on the media suggests that minorities are susceptible to harsher treatment. Niven (2004) found that black members of Congress implicated in the House banking scandal in 1992 received more coverage, and greater scrutiny than did the white members. Thus, Niven’s finding reflects Entman’s (2006) argument that the media ignores positive high profile minority role models and prefers to focus on minority celebrities involved in scandal or turmoil.

**Methods**

To collect the data I ran a search in LexisNexis’s News: TV & Radio Transcripts section on all transcripts from ABC News, CBS News, and the Fox
News Network. Because Fox News is a 24-hour cable news channel I expect it to produce more content than ABC and CBS, which produce nightly and morning news segments in addition to non-news entertainment. Not to mention, cable news networks conduct panel discussions intended to provide more in-depth analysis on an issue than the national nightly news, which typically summarizes top stories.

Each player was searched based on his name as registered with the NFL. For Vick, I limited his search from the date the initial warrant was executed on April 25, 2007 to the date he entered a plea agreement on August 20, 2007 (118 days). For Roethlisberger, I limited his search from the date the civil suit of the first alleged sexual assault was filed on July 17, 2009 to the date the District Attorney of the second alleged sexual assault announced that charges would not be filed on April 12, 2010 (270 days). I selected these end dates to control for any differing media attention that might result from Vick pleading guilty and Roethlisberger’s charges being dropped.

The search returned 140 stories for Vick and 25 for Roethlisberger. Of Vick’s 140 stories, ABC News ran 15, CBS News ran 30, and Fox News ran 95. Of Roethlisberger’s 25 stories, ABC News ran 10, CBS News ran 14, and Fox News ran 1. But, in many of these stories the players’ names were mentioned in relation to something other than their criminal cases, or in introductions about an upcoming segment on the case. So in stories where a commentator stated, “And, after the commercial break a story on Michael Vick’s troubles,” I eliminated it. At times determining what counted as a story and what didn’t became complicated. For example, there were instances where the commentator was clearly mentioning the player in an introduction for a following segment, but would discuss the case in a level of detail that I believed it necessary to include with the data. As such, I decided that if a commentator recognized the player and included a comment(s) that could be coded as two events related to the case, such as mentioning the crime and a potential sentence or mentioning the crime in two separate comments I included the segment.4

Eliminating irrelevant stories reduced Vick’s total to 79 stories of which ABC News ran 10, CBS News ran 15, and Fox News ran 54, and Roethlisberger’s total to 12 stories of which ABC News ran 5, CBS News ran 7, and Fox News ran 0. From another perspective, for Vick on average ABC News ran a story every 11.8 days, CBS News every 7.9 days, and Fox News every 2.2 days. Conversely, for Roethlisberger on average ABC News ran a story every 54 days, CBS News every 38.6 days, and Fox News ran no stories over 270 days.
For each story I measured 6 factors. The first two categories I classify as unfavorable to the player and the third and fourth categories as favorable. Category 1 consists of the number of instances where prison or a potential sentence is mentioned. Anytime a commentator mentioned “jail”, “prison”, or a fine for the alleged crime I code the language to this category. Suspensions or fines from the NFL or the player’s team are excluded. Because Vick reached a plea that included prison time he is expected to score higher than Roethlisberger, who never went to trial, in this category.

Category 2 consists of the number of instances when a representative of the victim is acknowledged. This could include “police”, “prosecutors”, a panelist who worked as prosecutor and challenges the player’s defense in a hypothetical scenario, “federal agents”, a victims’ rights’ group, like PETA or more generally “animal rights’ activists”.

A limitation of this category is that a host or panelist might come off as extremely critical of a player but, because the commentator doesn’t explicitly identify with one of the aforementioned groups (or, as being an opponent of the player) then he or she will not be coded in this category. As such, I expect category 2 to underestimate the actual number of events coded to ‘representatives of the victim’.

Category 3 measures the number of instances where the presumption of innocence is mentioned. This category also captures comments acknowledging that the player deserves his day in court. Because only Vick’s case went to trial and because after initially claiming innocence details of an 18-page indictment and news of co-defendants willing to testify against Vick challenged his claim, I expect him to score much higher in this category. Roethlisberger’s allegations, on the other hand, were based on his testimony versus that of his accuser.

Category 4 consists of the number of instances when a representative of the player is acknowledged or comments on the player’s behalf. Similar to category 2—but, this time in support of the player—this category includes comments from “defense attorneys”, a panelist who worked as defense attorney and acts in the player’s defense in a hypothetical scenario, “friends”, “family, “fans”, and other individuals who explicitly state support for the player.

I decided that a story was favorable to a player if the sum of categories 3 and 4 exceeded the sum of categories 1 and 2; unfavorable if 1 and 2 exceeded 3 and 4; and, neutral if equal. While this approach can be challenged for being, at the least it presents a comparable measure that illustrates the degree to which the two players were portrayed.

The final two categories present additional information for compara-
tive purposes. Category 5 captures the number of times the alleged crime is mentioned. In addition to “sexual assault” and “dog fighting”, I include descriptive language of the crime. Because Vick was implicated in more crimes he is expected to score higher in this category. Finally, category 6 reflects the number of times race is mentioned. The category includes terms, like “race”, “black/ white” (in a racial sense), “minority”, and “African American”. However, it excludes racially charged non-racial language, like “urban”, “ghetto”, and “hip-hop culture”. For each category I present the total events per category, the average number of events per story, and the percent of stories that were favorable or neutral for each player.

In the Appendix, I present the codebook. Similar to Kubrin (2005), to measure intercoder reliability a colleague coded 11% (n=10) of randomly selected programs from the sample. The percent agreement across categories varied from 80% for category 3 to 100% for categories 1 and 6. Overall reliability as measured with Scott’s pi was 0.91.

Results

Table 1 presents the findings for each player on all 3 networks. The ranges and means for both players by category are as follows: category 1 (0–17, 2.0); category 2 (0–9, 1.6), category 3 (0–10, 0.8), category 4 (0–6, 1.0), category 5 (0–19, 3.5), and category 6 (0–4, 0.1). Table 1 illustrates that Roethlisberger and Vick averaged somewhat similar scores in comments recognizing their representative or supporter (category 4). As expected Vick averaged a higher incidence per story than Roethlisberger in category 3 (presumption of innocence) and category 1 (sentencing). Surprisingly, on average representatives of victims were coded for Roethlisberger 50% more times than for Vick. In fact, Roethlisberger’s high average in category 2 offset Vick’s high average in category 1, which resulted in the two having an equal percentage of positive or neutral stories. Vick also averaged slightly more comments per story about his crime than did Roethlisberger, but again this was expected because of Vick’s case involving more criminal charges. Finally, the issue of race was only brought up in Vick’s stories.

Considering the disparity in attention Fox News paid the two players it is worthwhile to compare content by network. Table 2 illustrates that for ABC, Roethlisberger and Vick received the same average number of mentions per story on their alleged crime, but because Roethlisberger received more mentions in category 4 (primarily, commentators citing his lawyers) he received two times the percentage of favorable or neutral stories as did Vick. On CBS, Roethlisberger averaged higher scores in every category
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Representative of Victim</th>
<th>Presumption of Innocence</th>
<th>Representative of Player</th>
<th>Episode Position</th>
<th>Alleged Crime</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roethlisberger Total</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3 Favorable; 0 Unfavorable; 7 Neutral</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roethlisberger Average (12 Stories)</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>41% Favorable / Neutral</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vick Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>20 Favorable; 47 Unfavorable; 12 Neutral</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vick Average (79 Stories)</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>41% Favorable / Neutral</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
except 1 and 5, but the two players exhibited comparable percentages of favorable or neutral stories.

Fox News presents the most interesting contrast as over the course of 118 days it ran 57 stories on Vick, while over 270 days it ran no stories on Roethlisberger. Although on Fox News Vick received his highest average rating of scores in favorable categories, he also received his highest average rating of scores in unfavorable categories. Similarly, on Fox News he averaged the most comments on his crime per story and—save for one instance on CBS—it was the only network to address race. As mentioned above, these findings reflect the nature of cable news dedicating more content to each issue that its commentators discuss. But, this still doesn’t explain why Fox News dedicated so much content to Vick after running zero stories on Roethlisberger’s case.

Discussion

Some obvious limitations qualify the results. For example, Vick and Roethlisberger were not randomly selected. But, fewer than 100 athletes possess their notoriety and of those few are ever involved in significant criminal activity; thus, I was limited in my sampling opportunities for such a study. I also couldn’t control for the fact that the players were implicated in two different crimes. Further, the images and details from an 18-page indictment that surfaced during the period I collected data aroused vehement public disdain for Vick, which likely influenced the media. In Roethlisberger’s case no comparable details emerged.

There’s also the issue that Vick possessed attributes, like cornrows, tattoos, and prior involvement in a drug investigation that might reflect “negative stereotypes” of blacks. Entman (2006) argues that negative stereotyping represents a “core component of media images of young men of color and an important force in reinforcing general racial antagonism or racism (p. 13).” Rothbart and John (1993) find that greater emphasis is placed on individuals who confirm stereotypes. Thus, these negative stereotypes might augment the media’s scrutiny of Vick differently than its treatment of blacks who don’t possess such attributes.

Finally, quantitative content analysis presents at times a sterile perspective that is constrained by the methods. For example, there were instances where a story was coded favorably when in reality the commentators—usually a host—eviscerated a player. A story on Fox News on July 31, 2007 was coded as overwhelmingly favorable for Vick because two black ministers who appeared on the show explicitly supported him.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Incidence</th>
<th>Average Incidence</th>
<th>Sentencing</th>
<th>Representative of Victim</th>
<th>Presumption of Innocence</th>
<th>Representative of Player</th>
<th>Episode Position</th>
<th>Alleged Crime</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC: Roethlisberger</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2 Favorable;</td>
<td>2 Unfavorable;</td>
<td>1 Neutral</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC: Roethlisberger 0.20</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>60% Favorable / Neutral</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average (5 Stories)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC: Vick Total</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 Favorable;</td>
<td>7 Unfavorable;</td>
<td>2 Neutral</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC: Vick Average (10 Stories)</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>30% Favorable / Neutral</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS: Roethlisberger</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 Favorable;</td>
<td>5 Unfavorable;</td>
<td>1 Neutral</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS: Roethlisberger Average (7 Stories)</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>29% Favorable / Neutral</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS: Vick Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 Favorable;</td>
<td>11 Unfavorable;</td>
<td>3 Neutral</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS: Vick Average (15 Stories)</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>27% Favorable / Neutral</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox News: Roethlisberger 0 Total</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0 Favorable;</td>
<td>0 Unfavorable;</td>
<td>0 Neutral</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox News: Roethlisberger 0.0 Average (8 Stories)</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>N/A% Favorable / Neutral</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox News: Vick Total</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>18 Favorable;</td>
<td>29 Unfavorable;</td>
<td>7 Neutral</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox News: Vick Average (54 Stories)</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>46% Favorable / Neutral</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, throughout the segment the host attacked Vick and his guests’ position. Because the host did not explicitly state that he was a representative of the victim (i.e., prosecutor, police officer, animal rights group, etc.) and because there was no mention of a potential jail sentence or fine, the story was coded with zero incidences in the two unfavorable categories. Thus, it is necessary to explore the qualitative content of the transcripts to gain further insight of the media’s portrayal of the players.

A common theme for both players emerged where commentators would compare them to other athletes implicated in crime. In almost every instance, the athletes that Vick and Roethlisberger were referenced too were black. The most commonly mentioned athletes were Kobe Bryant, Mike Tyson, and Ray Lewis. The only white athletes ever mentioned were the Duke lacrosse players who were wrongfully accused of sexual assault. In stories on Vick there were also instances in which white female Hollywood celebrities, Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton, were mentioned to conjure antipathy toward the preferential treatment granted to the wealthy and famous in the criminal justice system.

Besides comparisons to other athletes linked to crime, the rest of the content on Roethlisberger was based on the information released by the authorities. This is likely the case because Fox News ignored his story, and ABC and CBS national news offered only brief reviews of the allegations. As such, the remaining discussion on qualitative content focuses on Vick.

In its coverage of Vick’s case Fox News ran perplexing content. For example, on shows, like the O'Reilly Factor, the host would often invite panelists to guess the length of Vick’s jail sentence without discussing any other matters relevant to the case. Then there was the episode on July 30, 2007 where Fox News hosted a panel on Vick that included former LAPD detective Mark Fuhrman as a special contributor. This invitation seemed particularly questionable considering Fuhrman’s checkered past with black football players as it was Fuhrman, who lied about his repeated use of racist language in the OJ Simpson murder trial, which served as a key piece of evidence in the defense’s efforts to suggest that Fuhrman planted evidence to implicate Simpson in the crime.

The Fox News commentary on Vick was also much more visceral and dehumanizing than the other two networks or any commentary on Roethlisberger. For example, in an August 20, 2007 story, a panelist calls Vick “barbaric” and describes his actions as “evil and Roman”. Obviously, such comments might reflect the nature of the crime as detailed in the 18-page indictment, and not race. This could explain why Hannity, a host, on August 17, 2007, invited a guest to discuss Vick’s case but began the discussion by stating, “You spend a lot of time out there defending these prima donna, overpaid athletes that think they’re above the law. And you’re not going to
defend Vick here, are you? . . . I mean, if anyone touched my two dogs, Molly and Judy, I’d probably kill them.” Perhaps Hannity’s emotions reflect an August 14, 2007 panelist who covered Mike Tyson’s rape trial and stated that Vick’s case aroused far greater emotions than Tyson’s because “allegations of a crime against animals is very, very serious, it runs very, very deep.”

In addition to castigating Vick, CBS News and Fox News sought to understand what could contribute to his involvement in dog fighting. For the most part, commentators focused on a subcultural theory of violence or, more specifically, that there are factors inherent in a segment of black culture that endorse criminality. For example, on July 27, 2007 on Fox News the host asked a panelist “Is there a subculture in the NFL and NBA and parts of hip-hop culture that celebrates this vicious dogfighting world that, you know, none of us were really aware of until this?” The guest, an animal rights activist, responds “You know, it’s very much an urban problem.” Similarly, in a July 19, 2007 interview on CBS a member of an animal rights’ organization suggests that dog fighting reflects a hip-hop subculture, and on July 18, 2007 on Fox News, a panelist argues that dog fighting is based in the culture of rap videos.

Jason Whitlock, a black sport writer then for the Kansas City Star, was perhaps the most explicit in an interview on Fox news on July 19, 2007. “You have these young athletes immersed in this hip-hop culture . . . [and] you’re just seeing what has happened with Michael Vick is just a symptom of this culture and the problems that this culture creates.” Although one can only surmise, presumably racially-neutral language, like “hip-hop culture” and “urban” are code for “black”. Finally, on Fox News on July 19, 2007, a commentator considers structural factors, when he suggests that Vick’s upbringing in the “ghetto in Hampton Roads [Virginia]” might contribute to his involvement in dog fighting.

However, I encountered two episodes in which commentators challenged this subcultural theory of violence. On August 4, 2007 on Fox News, a panelist claims, “I heard an interesting take on the ABC local station in Washington where the host was talking about could dog fighting be part of the African-American culture? I thought that was awfully ridiculous.” Then, on August 17, 2007 on CBS, Harry Edwards, a sports sociologist, explains how criminality is perhaps a broader social dilemma that extends beyond race:

Well, again, if you — if everyone around you is involved in this shadow subculture and it’s not—even though it’s illegal, it’s not—it’s not enforced traditionally, the laws are not enforced, people can get into a situation where they do not feel that they are ethically or morally doing anything wrong.
People are not, you know, going to confession over office pool gambling even though it’s a multibillion dollar industry. It’s a shadow subculture in American society. There’s an entire culture going on there, and it’s not an educational problem, even though that’s where it’s been consigned. We need to really begin to look at some of these shadow subcultures that are so pervasive in American society, and dog fighting is one of them.

In contrast to understanding Vick’s involvement in dog fighting, there were also supporters, like Dr. RL White, Jr., the head of Atlanta’s NAACP branch, who emphasized a presumption of innocence. When asked on August 6, 2007 on Fox News if Vick was targeted because of his race, White responded, “Well, my claim is that he is being lynched, a public lynching. . . When he has been convicted as guilty, then . . .” In another episode on Fox News on July 31, 2007 when two black ministers offered their support for Vick, host Oliver North disregarded their comments and asked “wonder where all you guys were 20 years ago when I was going through that.” North’s challenge suggests he believes that the ministers support Vick not on the account of the events of the case, but in racial solidarity.

It should also be recognized that there were Fox News panelists, who acknowledged the harsh scrutiny Vick was experiencing. For example, on July 21, 2007 a commentator claimed that “certainly the media have convicted Vick”. There were also segments where a guest challenged the media’s disregard of incidents of whites committing violence against animals, like the practice of “hog dog rodeo”, which on July 26, 2007 the guest described as “a sport that I’m told is mostly a white people sick fascination.”

The qualitative data presented above is intended to complement the content analysis. Because of the small sample size and the different circumstance of the crimes, the findings cannot fully explain the effect race had on ABC News, CBS News and Fox News’ coverage of Michael Vick’s and Ben Roethlisberger’s cases. Rather these findings illustrate that the sports media appears to present stories on race and crime in a manner similar to the broader news media. However, the results do offer indisputable evidence that in less than half the number of days, all 3 networks place greater emphasis on Vick’s case than Roethlisberger’s. And, in attempting to explain Vick’s involvement in dog fighting, the media overwhelmingly emphasized the influence of culture with racially-embedded language in a manner that could be perceived as condemning a segment of black culture.

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Appendix: Code Book

Unit of Data Collection: Each quote from a commentator about (or related to) the athlete. The same comment can be coded in multiple categories, but it cannot be coded multiple times for the same category. For example, the quote “The player’s defense attorney stated that he does not expect his client to face jail time” would be coded once in categories 4 (for the mentioning of the “defense attorney”) and 1 (for the mentioning of “jail time”). The quote “The player faces jail time, a suspended license, community service, and a large fine” would be coded only once for category 1 (and, not four times for each potential penalty).

However, in cases where multiple speakers state:

**Speaker 1:** He deserves jail time.
**Speaker 2:** They should at least suspend his license.
**Speaker 3:** A couple hundred hours of community service would teach him a lesson.
**Speaker 1:** Well, can we at least all agree that he should have to pay a large fine?

This back-and-forth would be coded four times for category 1 because there are 4 separate comments about sentencing. Similarly an exchange like:

**Speaker 1:** The player deserves his day in court . . .
**Speaker 2:** But, he committed a violent crime.
**Speaker 1:** There exists a presumption of innocence in this country.

This exchange would be coded twice for category 3 because of Speaker 1’s two comments. Presumably, it was part of the same comment but because Speaker 2 interrupted Speaker 1, and the transcript identifies Speaker 1’s second comment as separate, then it is coded as separate comments. The transcript defines the structure of comments. If a comment is uninterrupted then it cannot be coded more than once per category. But, every time there is a break in the commentary because the transcript indicates the comments of another speaker, the interrupted comments are coded separately.

**Player:** Vick or Roethlisberger
**Network:** Fox News, ABC, or CBS
**Date:** MM/DD/YY
**Episode Number:** The number out of the total transcripts for the player. At the top of each transcript the number is listed.
Category 1 — Sentencing: Captures the number of instances where prison or a potential penalty is mentioned. Anytime a commentator mentions “jail”, “prison”, or a fine for the alleged crime I code the language to this category. However, suspensions or fines from the NFL or the player’s team are excluded.

Category 2 — Comments of Representative of Victim: Captures the number of instances when a representative of the victim is acknowledged. An example of a representative being acknowledged is something like, “Animal rights’ activists accuse the player of criminal neglect.” Another example might be “Police led the player into the precinct where they planned on interrogating him.” This group includes “police”, “prosecutors”, a panelist who worked as prosecutor and challenges the player’s defense in a hypothetical scenario, “federal agents”, a victims’ rights’ group, like PETA or more generally “animal rights’ activists”.

Category 3 — The Presumption of Innocence: Captures the number of instances where the presumption of innocence is mentioned. This category also captures comments acknowledging that the player deserves his day in court.

Category 4 — Comments of Representative of Player: Captures the number of instances a representative of the player is acknowledged. An example of a representative being acknowledged is something like, “The player’s lawyer released a statement stating that the player will enter a not-guilty plea.” Another example might be “Outside the courthouse fans held signs showing their support for the player.” This category includes comments from “defense attorneys”, a panelist who worked as defense attorney and acts in the player’s defense in a hypothetical scenario, “friends”, “family”, and “fans”. Other individuals that don’t fall into these groups but who explicitly state support for the player are also included. For example, a discussion might include a panelist who is otherwise unknown to the player but claims “I support the player because I identify with how the public can target high-profile young men.”

Category 5 — Alleged Crime: Captures the number of times the alleged crime is mentioned. For Roethlisberger the terms “sexual assault” and “rape” will be most common. Related language like “he assaulted a woman” or “forced himself upon her” will be included. For Vick, this will include any language related to violence against animals, gambling, racketeering, and anything regarding illegal interstate operations.
**Category 6—Race:** Captures the number of times race or ethnicity is mentioned. This category includes terms like “black” or “white” (in a racial sense), “minority” or “African American”. However, it does not include racially charged non-racial language, like “urban”, “ghetto”, and “hip-hop culture”.
Notes

1. In July 2007, federal authorities charged Michael Vick with operating an unlawful interstate dogfighting operation. In July, 2009, Ben Roethlisberger was accused in a civil suit for allegedly sexually assaulting a woman in a hotel room in 2008. In March 2010, Roethlisberger was again accused of sexual assault but, this time in a Georgia nightclub. Where Vick eventually entered a guilty plea for his crime and was sentenced to 23 months in prison, Roethlisberger was not charged for either of the alleged crimes.

2. With respect to this argument, Bridges and Sheen (1998) present valuable research with policy implications. In their analysis of probation officers’ written accounts of juvenile offenders and their crimes, they find that the officers emphasize black youths’ delinquency in terms of negative attitudinal and personality traits, but white youths’ delinquency in terms of the individual’s social environment. Because court officials rely more heavily on negative internal characteristics to determine the likelihood of recidivism black youths were assumed to be more dangerous and, thus, received a severer sentence than white youths.

3. Black athletes tend to be placed in positions that demand athleticism and physicality, like wide receiver or running back, and white athletes tend to be placed in positions that require intellect, like quarterback.

4. I required two events rather than one because there were many segues, like “And next a story on Michael Vick’s dog fighting case . . .” that recognizes the player and one event but serve only to introduce (and not discuss) the case in latter segment.

5. Only nouns are included for categories 2 and 4. So “prosecutor” would suffice but “I’ve prosecuted similar cases . . .” would not.

6. Because of the graphic nature of the crimes I withhold specifics. But, in Vick’s case (as an example) any sentence that listed multiple acts that could qualify as “dog fighting” I coded the sentence as 1 event. If in another sentence a commentator mentioned illegal gambling then the comment would be coded as 2 events.

7. I should point out that considering the options Vick and Roethlisberger represent ideal cases in that the two players possess many similarities with the exception of race. For example, both are quarterbacks in the NFL, former first round picks (Vick 1st overall; Roethlisberger 11th overall), close in age (Vick is a little less than 2 years older), from working class backgrounds (Vick from Newport News, VA; Roethlisberger from Lima, OH), praised for their physical acumen (Vick more so for speed; Roethlisberger for strength), and former college standouts (Vick at Virginia Tech; Roethlisberger at Miami of Ohio).

8. Interestingly, Vick’s operation took place in rural Virginia. Perhaps the guest is using “urban” to imply “black”?
References


