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CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | REVIEW ARTICLE

Communication theoretical implications of the Ray Rice controversy

Payal Cascio^{1*}

Abstract: The Ray Rice Controversy is a condemnatory case that prompted immediate action on the part of the NFL (National Football League) to execute organizational level changes in regard to their domestic abuse policy that applied not only to their players, but all employees that are a part of this organization. This paper attempts to research the events and the news coverage by the media that affected the proceedings of this case and its role in raising awareness toward the prevalence of domestic violence among the players of the NFL and instigating major policy changes at the organizational level of the NFL. This study examines the theoretical implications of communication theories and their protagonist role in bringing about communal and regulatory changes.

Subjects: Area Studies; Communication Studies; Humanities

Keywords: social media; organizational policy change; agenda setting theory; diffusion theory; dependency theory; uses and gratification theory

1. Theoretical implications of the Ray Rice controversy

The Ray Rice case made national headlines consistently for several months in the American mass media and the various outlets of the social media globally, beginning from February 2014. Raymell Maurice “Ray” Rice is a professional American football running back who is currently a free agent. He

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am a second year doctoral student and a graduate assistant at the department of Educational Foundations and Leadership at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Presently, I am employed with South Louisiana Community College as a public speaking instructor for the past seven plus years and enjoy teaching a diverse student population some of who are first generation college students.

My research interest is focused on investigating the theoretical implications of communication and leadership theories in the media controversies that break on the news following the converging and diverging effects of the social and public media, and the role it plays in initiating societal and organizational level cultural changes. Thus far, I have published a commentary piece on Teacher’s College Record website that critiques Malala Yousafzai’s biography. My dissertation topic is “Core Communication Skills that Facilitate Organizational Change and Effective Leadership in the Context of Higher Education.”

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The Ray Rice Controversy is a meaningful and momentous case in the history of the American National Football League, that drew enormous attention from the media and an outcry from the public to seek justice. Since this case was armored with the undeniable proof of the video footage which showed one of their own star athletes (Ray Rice) involved in an act of violence toward his then fiancée, it was hard for the National Football League (NFL) to ignore this controversy. Consequentially, the NFL could not disregard this case or the magnitude of the repercussions that it stood to face as a result of ignoring this scandal. This debate triggered a media frenzy that went viral and compelled the head of the NFL to initiate organizational level policy changes for the first time in the history of the NFL that applied not only to the players but all employees of the NFL.

played college football for Rutgers University and was drafted by the Baltimore Ravens in the second round of the 2008 National Football League (NFL) Draft (NFL.com, 2014). Rice was caught punching his fiancée Janay in the face by an elevator security camera of an Atlantic City casino (Ozanian, 2014). Once this video went viral on the media, he was arrested and consequently indicted for third-degree aggravated assault on 27 March 2014 (Natta, 2014). The blow was so hard, it knocked her unconscious (Elliott, 2014). The brutality on Rice's part and the level of violence that was witnessed by millions of viewers around the world specifically in the US as a result of this video being released by TMZ.com caused a public uproar. The reaction of the media and the public was that of an outrage and horror. The reason for a reaction of this magnitude rested in the undeniable evidence that the video footage rendered to the fans of Rice and people who watched it in general. A video provides a sense of reality that no print or voice conveyed media report can match. It puts everything into perspective and shows the culprit in the midst of the deed that he is being accused of. In other words, the video footage was indisputable and irrefutable. Fans of Ray Rice, the NFL, and the public of America could no longer defend their idolized hero or contradict what or who was in that video. It was all out in the open and Ray Rice's professional football career, his personal reputation, and his personal life was inadvertently on rocky grounds as a result of this video leak. This paper attempts to provide a detailed timeline and progression of events that occurred as a result of this incident being exposed by the social media agencies. Regardless of the controversy and the scandal that this case stirred, the main purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the social media on rallying and mobilizing social and organizational change through the laws of agenda setting theory. Agenda setting is significantly more than the classical assertion that the news tells us *what to think about*. The news also tells us *how to think about it*. The choice of objects for consideration and the election of frames for thinking about these objects are influential agenda-setting roles. Central to the news agenda and its daily set of objects-issues, personalities, events, etc. are the perspectives that journalists and, subsequently, members of the public employ to think about each object (McCombs, 1993). These standpoints draw attention toward certain elements and away from others. The generic name for these journalistic perspectives is *newsworthiness*. But newsworthy objects are framed in a wide variety of ways.

This case is noteworthy because it drew the attention of millions of Americans especially the football fans, not only in the United States but also world-wide. These fans, closely follow the lives of their favorite professional football players, idolize them as their role models and hold them in high regard. They faithfully support their teams and look forward to the sometimes rather confusing plays and picks of this game. Most of all, the fans eagerly await the start of the football season each and every year. It is a sport that is deeply engrained in the American psyche and is a culture on its own, the American football culture. This sport is played under the command of the esteemed and world renowned NFL. As a result of the widespread popularity of this sport, the Ray Rice case came to be known as a momentous one, that not only stirred enormous controversy in all channels of the media but also brought attention to the cause of domestic violence against women that prevails at all levels of society. This case was crucial because it also triggered organizational policy changes within the NFL of America. As Mike Ozanian, who is an executive editor for Forbes, stated in August of 2014, "The NFL is by far the most popular sport on television and media right fees underpin the league's sweeping increase in team values."

Rice was arrested and consequently indicted for third-degree aggravated assault on 27 March 2014, relating to an instance where he punched his then-fiancée (now wife) in the face. The blow knocked her unconscious.

According to an article in the Time magazine, Rice spoke on 23 May 2014 for the first time since being arrested following the incident in Atlantic City in February. Speaking at a news conference, Rice apologized for the situation he and his wife were in, and promised reporters that he is "working every day to be a father, a better husband and a better role model" Ray Rice.

"I failed miserably," Rice said. "But I wouldn't call myself a failure 'cause I'm working myself back up."

From this point onwards, here is a step by step timeline of events that transpired as a result of this controversy becoming public, as retrieved from CNN:

Initially, the heads of the Ravens organization came to Rice's defense in the days following his arrest. Both Harbaugh and general manager Ozzie Newsome iterated that Rice would continue to be in the team's plans at running back. The only penalty issued by the NFL was a mere two game suspension on 24 July 2014 starting 30 August 2014 as a result of this case which was later changed to six games (Sessler, 2015).

But once the second video surfaced on the net (TMZ.com) that showed Rice punching his wife in the face and rendering her unconscious, was when the media frenzy really ignited the fire in this case and criticized NFL's feeble reaction to what had actually taken place.

As a result of the media uproar, and the heavy criticism that was exacted on the NFL and Rice, the Ravens terminated Rice's contract the same day, the second video got released by TMZ.

NFL indefinitely suspends Rice on 1 August 2014.

Rice fights back, files for grievances and finally gets approved to be reinstated to the NFL on 28 November 2014.

As a result of all these timely news breaking events that were broadcasted simultaneously on all channel of the news and social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest, the NFL was compelled to make some major policy changes at its organizational level. Here is what occurred (Maine, 2014). It persuaded the NFL commissioner Goodell to enact a new Domestic Violence Policy in August 2014. This policy applies not just to players but all employees of the NFL. The following are the main highlights of what this policy covers; suspension length from two games to six games without pay for first time offenders; secondly to provide support and training to athletes to prevent future cases of domestic violence. Then, lastly a second offense will expel the player for a year without pay from the NFL.

This paper will examine the events that led up to the Ray Rice controversy, the reaction of the social media in response to the video footage that was released, and the impact of the social media in bringing about macro level organizational policy change at the NFL.

So what are we attempting to investigate through this paper? The question is:

What is the relationship between the agenda setting theory and the Ray Rice case? How can this theory be applied to this case? Are there any other theoretical constructs that can be identified within this case?

2. Literature review

In order to unravel the implications of the agenda setting theory in the Ray Rice case, it is necessary for us to firstly understand what the main premise of the agenda setting model is, what does it stand for and how does it impact our daily lives? Casually speaking, agenda setting theory is compared to a hypodermic-needle-theory (Shaw, 1979). Agenda setting theory purports that the media has a direct and a powerful impact on the attitudes of its viewers. The audiences are seen as passive subjects who are waiting to receive the information from their media source and who then in turn start to emulate the media and repeat what they heard from the media. Agenda setting theory focuses on the audiences need for information or information hunger (Nelson, Titsworth, & Harter, 2011), whereby people's habitual exposure to the various channels of the media plays a significant role in shaping the views and opinions of people on various issues. Agenda setting seeks to gratify the desire of people to acquire new and timely information. Needs of an individual may be intrapersonal or interpersonal in nature. By intrapersonal need we mean, that this theory gratifies the need for information hunger by providing facts and figures that satisfy that need for the audience to know. Interpersonal needs satiate the need of the audience to engage in face to face dialog on a particular topic or online feedback in the form of reviews, twitter feeds, and Instagram messages.

The communication research marketplace is a perilous arena, a situation fostered by the rapidly changing nature of communication itself during the past 50 years. Under these conditions, the ongoing and increasing strength of agenda-setting research is exceptional.

As a theoretical perspective, it has had a rich 25-years history since McCombs and Shaw's (1972) opening strategy during the 1968 presidential election. The three main components of the agenda setting process are (a) media agenda, (b) public agenda, (c) and policy agenda. All three components are guarded by gate keepers for example news editors, renowned journalists etc.; influential media also plays a significant role in determining what news event will be highlighted. Examples of influential media in this day and age is all the major television and radio networks like ABC, NBC, CBS, print media, and social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and undeniably the internet. Spectacular news events also steer the attention of audience to focus on only certain news events while ignoring others.

The key agenda-setting role of the media may be the promotion of social consensus on what the agenda is, whether it is the traditional agenda of issues or something that has the capability to arouse a reaction from the masses and not just a small segment of the population (McCombs, 1993). The public agenda of this theory is what creates the mass appeal in any news story. It is the media that invokes ideas into the minds of the public and incites a reaction from them. In the Ray Rice case, the public agenda that the media raised hype on was the incident of domestic violence that had occurred. The media roused a wide spread reaction from the public by repeatedly showing the video where rice is seen hitting his now wife and knocking her unconscious to the floor. They further magnified the issue by using it in the headlines of all major news broadcasts on TV, radio, and all avenues of social media. Regardless of whatever may be the components of a news story the outcome from the side of the public is always considerable. So this factor of the public agenda also ties into the media agenda of the agenda setting theory. The media agenda and the public agenda work simultaneously to create an atmosphere that is conducive to making a news story that will incite changes at a societal and organizational level in any culture (Walgrave & van Aelst, 2006). Therefore, the media and public agenda compliment the needs and goals on each other to create a newscast that is powerful enough to mobilize changes. How a writer frames an issue, sets an agenda of characteristics can influence how we think about it. Agenda setting is therefore a process that can affect both what to think about and how to think about it (McCombs, 1993).

The dynamics of the policy agenda component of agenda setting theory was researched by Wood and Peake (1998), who also found that the public perception of a news event was largely influenced by the news media. The dynamics of this cause and effect relationship between the two variables leads to policy level changes in the society where it is taking place. Therefore, the three components of the agenda setting theory synchronize to create a news event that is not only newsworthy but also has the bearings to lead to policy changes. The influential powers of the media, combined with public support create an environment that has the potential to make macro level changes in any scenario. This policy agenda aspect is directly reflected in the Ray Rice case whereby the NFL was compelled to re-evaluate the situation at hand based on the negative news coverage and media backlash that condemned their ineffective actions to this atrocious act on the part of one of their players and make the necessary policy changes within their organization. This case caused policy changes that applied not only to the players but everyone who was employed by the NFL.

When mass media stress a topic, the audience getting the message will regard this topic to be important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Numerous studies all over the world established firm correlations between media and public priorities (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Ghanem, 1997; McCombs, 1993; Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981). Within political science, too, agenda setting is a frequently used model. Political scientists draw on it to describe and explain how political actors (government, parliament, political parties, etc.) determine their priorities, give attention to or ignore issues, and do, or do not, take decisions or a stance concerning these topics (Cobb & Elder, 1971; Jones & Baumgartner, 1993; Kingdon & Thurber, 1984; Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994; Strom, Budge, & Laver, 1994).

The gatekeepers are media personalities whose faces are recognized by their audience. Influential leaders could also range from a variety of celebrities in sports, cinema, television and also radio hosts who have a massive fan following. These could also be categorized as opinion leaders within a social system whose endorsements have the power to sway public opinion. In order to depict the impact of the media on the Ray Rice case, the following is a discussion of the twitter backlash that occurred by celebrities who witnessed the Ray Rice video.

Jamie Lee Curtis: “Roger Goodell shame on you and the NFL. Two games? Really? Two games? Assault is assault. Take an action. Find your mind.” (TMZ.com, 2014)

Seth Rogen: “I don’t know much about football, but I know that Ray Rice is a piece of garbage who shouldn’t be allowed to play it professionally anymore.”

Mia Farrow: “Seems a man can do just about anything to a woman (or her kids) if she’s ‘just’ the girlfriend -or wife #RayRice http://mobile.nytimes.com/2014/09/09/sports/football/ray-rice-video-shows-punch-and-raises-new-questions-for-nfl.html?_r=0&referrer=...”

Tweets such as these by celebrities who are idolized by many create opportunities for open dialog among the members of a society and that is what feeds the fire of the media keep a topic burning in the media. All these tweets clearly denounce the actions of Ray Rice. They call for action and some sort of justice. In addition to this, President Obama talked about the NFL’s handling the Ray Rice domestic violence case, saying it indicated that the league was “behind the curve” with some of its policies. “You don’t want to be winging it when something like this happens,” Obama said during an interview with ESPN’s Colin Cowherd. “You want to have clear policies in place.” Obama called the Rice situation “unfortunate,” but said he was glad it raised awareness about domestic violence issues and hoped it would as serve as a “wake-up call.” “What’s true in the NFL—and this is not unique to the NFL but it may be a little more pronounced in the NFL—is that there’s been a little bit of an old boy’s network in how it operates,” he said Emily (2015). Any news event that gets a reaction from the president is an indication that this case is noteworthy.

3. Discussion and theoretical implications

3.1. Diffusion theory

The original version of diffusion model clarified that media effects are indirect, that even information and news flows from radio and print media to opinion leaders and from these designated influential, to the rest of the population (Shaw, 1979). The Ray Rice case bears a strong footing in the diffusion theory when examined closely. Diffusion is a process whereby a novel idea or object is transmitted through certain channels over time among the members of a social system to induce social change. Even the smallest unit of innovation is subject to analysis and scrutiny. The difference between the process of diffusion and dissemination of information lies merely in the way the two impart information into a social system. In diffusion certain distinct channels are utilized as means of imparting information into the target audience, there are control variables in this theoretical model that regulate exactly where and how the information is dispersed. However, in dissemination of information, there is no way to check as to how many people or to what extent the information was effective in carrying out its intended purpose. There is no measure to verify the number of people who received the message.

Action is not inconsequential; it comes from organizational actors who have positions, skills, obligations, and histories that are primarily found in the groups of which those actors are members. Transformation and permanency are recognized through the ways in which organizational group members react to old and new institutionally derived ideas through their already existing commitments and interests and their ability to implement or enforce them by way of their existing power and capability (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Rice’s actions caused a catalytic reaction whereby the dissemination of information that ensued was so rampant that it leads to a change of rules and regulations at the NFL organizational level.

3.2. Dependency theory

Media dependency theory itself theorizes that media influence is determined by the interrelations between the media, its audience, and society (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982). The individual's desire for information from the media is the primary variable in explaining why media messages have cognitive, affective, or variable effects. Media dependency is high when an individual's goal satisfaction relies on information from the media system. Rubin and Windahl (1986) augmented the dependency model to contain the gratifications pursued by the audiences as an interactive component with media dependency. For Rubin and Windahl, the combination of gratifications sought and socially determined dependency produced media effects. They argued that dependency on a medium or a message results when individuals either intentionally seek out information or ritualistically use specific communication media channels or messages.

3.3. Uses and gratification theory

The original uses and gratification tradition to mass media stressed intrapersonal needs rather than interpersonal factors (Shaw, 1979) to the distribution of information. This account of the uses and gratification theory states that people pick and choose what piece of news event, entertainment, or media coverage they want to focus their attention to from the whole gamut of information that they are exposed to via the media. The people choose information that gratifies their needs and wants based on their interests and what benefits them. Not what the media can do to people but what they do for people is the answer sought by researchers who favor the gratifications approach (Shaw, 1979). The uses and gratification theory asserts that the media serves as a medium to satisfy the needs and wants of the people (Ruggiero, 2000). In the Ray Rice case, there emerged a pending need for an organization as magnanimous as the NFL to recognize and condemn the actions of one of its star players. While his actions were witnessed by millions around the world, it added a dimension of undeniable evidence to this case. The NFL is a male dominated league and is looked upon with great respect by the youth of this country whether male or female. Therefore, the burden to seek a resolution and take action in this incident weighed heavy on its shoulder. The uses and gratification theory is reflected in terms of policy changes taking place at the NFL whereby the audience rested in peace after receiving assurance from the head of the NFL that these kind of actions will not be tolerated in the future. This was all made possible as a result of the media focusing all its attention to this case and creating hype to where it was no longer probable for the NFL to ignore this matter (Ruggiero, 2000).

4. Conclusion

It is imperative that all the theories cited within this paper bear a close connection to the Ray Rice case. The analogy is meticulous enough to where we are able to dissect, compare, and contrast some key elements and employ the various constructs that these theories rely on. I am pleased to have utilized this case as a part of my final case study. It has helped me decipher the mechanisms of the media, public, and policy agendas within the agenda setting theory, uses and gratification theory, and the dependency theory. Attitudes and behavior are usually governed by cognitions—what a person knows, thinks, and believes. Hence the agenda setting function of the mass media implies a potentially massive influence whose full dimensions and consequences are hard to measure or quantify (Shaw, 1979). This case study is pertinent to the socioeconomic make-up of the present day society not only in the United States but all over the world.

Another product of social media influence is the “Campaign on the Dress” by the Salvation Army in South Africa that went viral all over the world. This campaign gained strength and momentum as soon as it hit the social media since it incited 30 million Twitter impressions and loads of media attention (O’Neil, 2015). In an interview with Carin Holmes who is the public relations secretary for the Salvation Army in South Africa, Holmes told O’Neil about how domestic violence transcends international borders, continents, and cultural boundaries, so it is not something that pertains to particular country or culture. The blog first made its appearance on BuzzFeed on 26 February 2015 and was consequently viewed tens of millions of times. Holmes goes on to say that it was a last minute decision she had to make with a one hour window for this ad to be printed in the Cape Times, but as soon as she saw the pics she knew it was going to be a hit. It was so much of a success that it has been

sourced by 200 news organizations internationally. They have been contacted by several victims of domestic violence who requested them to provide guidance as to where they could seek help and support. Ron Busroe, national spokesman for Salvation Army USA, said the campaign spun a petty discussion into something significant.

This campaign emerged shortly after Ray Rice case had made headlines in the US so the cause of domestic violence was still fresh in everyone's mind when "the Dress" appeared on the social and news media. Surprisingly, this campaign also brought forth the fact that Salvation Army is the second largest provider of such services in the country with 18 domestic violence shelters. This part of its mission is a little known fact about the Salvation Army.

The Ray Rice case is not only a scandalous case that made national headlines and evoked a blasphemous response from the media toward Rice and the ineffective actions on the part of the NFL, but it raised a public outcry where celebrities in the nation expressed their comments and concern toward the inadequacies that lay deep rooted in the chauvinistic culture of the NFL. It is a case that produced significant and momentous outcomes. If this case had not received the amount of media coverage that it did and had Roger Goodell not been held accountable for the actions of Ray Rice, this case too, just like many others would have disappeared into the oblivion. One important factor that caused such a massive reaction was the video footage that left nothing to doubt when it came to indicting Rice's actions. That is the power of the media, whereby social and organizational changes can be mobilized and change can be effectuated, based on what agenda the media puts forth to the public (O'Neil, 2015).

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