

CTE, Media, and the NFL: Framing a Public Health Crisis as a Football Epidemic

By Travis R. Bell, Janelle Applequist, and Christian Dotson-Pierson. Published 2019 by Lexington Books, Lanham, MD. \$90.00. 182 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4985-7056-5

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CTE, Media, and the NFL: Framing a Public Health Crisis as a Football Epidemic serves as an intriguing introduction to a mysterious disease called CTE (chronic traumatic encephalopathy). Travis R. Bell, a former sports broadcast journalist, is an assistant professor of digital and sport media in the Zimmerman School of Advertising & Mass Communications at the University of South Florida. Janelle Applequist is in the same school as an assistant professor of advertising. Christian Dotson-Pierson is a speech instructor at the University of South Carolina. These authors address the ways that the media have framed the public health crisis. The book is written in an informative and interesting way, making it a text readers can readily absorb. In the first chapter, the authors introduce readers to the brief historical relationship among football, brain injury, concussion, and CTE. They note that the public tended to perceive concussion in American football as a trivial injury that serves as a symbol of masculinity and nationalism. Research regarding brain injury and CTE evolved throughout the 2000s, however, and led to greater awareness of the illness. The results of the research also led to controversy and public discussion regarding CTE in the National Football League (NFL) and in other sports including basketball, hockey, and soccer. Despite the relationship between CTE and other sports, however, the media have continued to focus on CTE's link to the NFL.

This book comprises nine chapters, which can be divided into three sections. The first section provides historical context to help readers better understand the relationship between CTE and the NFL. The second chapter, "Framing Global Epidemics," presents two cases to illustrate the importance of framing theory and discuss the ways in which the media frame health risks. First, the authors present Magic Johnson's and Greg Louganis's HIV/AIDS statuses to demonstrate the relationship between health concerns and the way the media frame issues related to hegemonic masculinity and sport. Johnson, who "fit the already masculine construction of sport in the United States (p. 20)," has been viewed as a hero who has lived his life despite his illness. On the contrary, Louganis, who announced publicly that he was homosexual, was framed as a carrier of the illness.

The authors also present the case of Big Tobacco, which serves as another public health issue related to media framing and masculinity. After a ban was imposed prohibiting cigarette advertisements in broadcast media, cigarette advertising in print media increased, and smoking continued to be portrayed as a performance of masculinity. These two examples are indicative of the ways the

media can simultaneously create public awareness of an issue and public panic regarding it. The third chapter, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” focuses on American football and its direct association with masculinity, which has been amplified during wartime. Whether they were athletes or soldiers, men who suffered injuries yet were able to overcome their pain or illness were viewed similarly in the hegemonic masculine space. The way football has been equated with battle or war can be easily seen in the media.

As the title “From Punch-Drunk to CTE” suggests, the fourth chapter discusses the evolution of the term *punch-drunk* when it first emerged in the 1920s to *CTE*, which appeared at the end of the 1940s. In 1994, the NFL commissioner established the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury committee to examine the impact of head injuries on players. However, because of its connection to the NFL, the committee provided biased findings that conflicted with the findings of other research, and this brought up an ethical problem. A law was enacted in 2009 to warn players and others of the risk of CTE. At the same time, the NFL updated its policies pertinent to CTE. It took decades before CTE was given any appreciable attention among the public and before it was seen as a legitimate lethal illness; however, public perceptions regarding the ways that brain injury can be deleterious to athletes continue to gain ground.

Chapters 5–7 compose the second section of the book. These chapters demonstrate how the media present CTE, and in doing this, the authors analyze three sport films and coverage from six newspapers ranging from 2006 to 2017. In the fifth chapter specifically, they examine numerous newspaper articles to indicate how the media framed CTE as a scientific problem linked to football and the NFL. A 2009 congressional hearing was a watershed for CTE, as it led to a sharp increase in the number of newspaper headlines that mentioned the disease. Most newspapers, however, linked brain injury and thus CTE to the NFL rather than to contact sports in general. In the next chapter, the authors note that the negative correlation between concussion and CTE may be seen as a positive thing for the public to reduce the level of confusion in terms; however, most of the articles examined did not engage deeply enough to alleviate confusion brought about by the terms used to discuss the subject at hand.

The sixth chapter, titled “Beyond the Headlines,” highlights the ways the media perpetuated the notion that concussion and CTE are directly linked to one another and how this allowed for continued misunderstandings and confusion among the public. Newspaper headlines framed CTE as a football problem, and, as noted previously, journalists provided only the most basic information rooted in scientific knowledge due a relative lack of scientific evidence and a desire to publish content accessible to readers. To this end, to attract readers, journalists frequently adopted commonly understood words rather than rarely used scientific terms. As such, to better understand brain injury in scientific terms, additional reading was required of the average reader.

The authors analyze three sport films in the seventh chapter: *Head Games*, *League of Denial*, and *Concussion*. These movies, which addressed brain injuries and CTE, brought about increased public discourse regarding the subject at hand. The films were not all perfectly rigorous with regard to either context or knowledge, however. For instance, *Concussion* never actually mentioned the term *concussion*; instead, the film focused primarily on CTE. However, how brain