PTI and The Sport Ethic

In 1991, Robert Hughes and Jay Coakley first defined a key concept in the study of the sociology of sport. After reading numerous books about sports stars and talking with coaches and athletes, the two defined four traits of what they call The Sport Ethic. These are the four principles they found that elite athletes adhere to and define themselves by. They also found that this ethic was a leading cause in what they call “deviant overconformity” among athletes, that can lead to long-term health problems, the use of performance-enhancing drugs, and other negative behaviors.

While the notion of deviant overconformity has been widely studied by sports sociologists, The Sport Ethic itself has not been the focus of much research. And there has been little in-depth research into the role sports media plays in the establishment of The Sport Ethic.

The purpose of this pilot study is to examine how the mainstream sports media helps promote and perpetuate The Sport Ethic. Specifically, it will use a qualitative content analysis on a constructed week of Pardon the Interruption (PTI), a talk show on ESPN, to see how the construct of The Sport Ethic is reflected in the stories discussed and how they are discussed.

PTI is a daily talk show that airs on ESPN, the all-sports cable network. Hosted by Tony Kornheiser and Michael Wilbon, longtime friends and sports journalists, the show features the two arguing about the top sports stories of the day. As one of the most popular shows on ESPN, the primary outlet for television sports news in the United States, and one that is hosted by two veteran sportswriters who formerly worked for one of the country’s main newspapers, PTI can be considered an accurate reflection of mainstream sports news and mainstream sports media culture.
Coakley detailed how media coverage of sports is often focused on the ideological theme of success, that winning is the ultimate goal of any athlete or team. Taking this one step further, the ability to win in the eyes of elite athletes and coaches comes from adherence to the norms and traits of The Sport Ethic. It stands to reason that media coverage of sports news would reflect the norms and traits of The Sport Ethic, since that leads to one of the dominant narratives in sports media coverage. The goal of this study is to see how much The Sport Ethic is actually reflected in media coverage of sports, using PTI as an example. Using existing communications theoretical concepts of gatekeeping and framing, this study will look at both what types of stories are discussed on the show and how they are discussed. This will provide a more balanced, well-rounded look at the show.

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do the topics selected for inclusion in a PTI broadcast reflect The Sport Ethic?

**RQ2:** How do the way in which the hosts discuss the topics in a PTI broadcast reflect and perpetuate The Sport Ethic.

For this study, the researcher created a constructed week of PTI using the Podcast of the show that is made available through the ESPN website and the iTunes store. The constructed week started on Monday, March 26 and ran for five weeks, with each week providing the next day’s podcast in the sample. Therefore, there are five podcasts in the study, spanning five weeks and making one constructed week.

The data suggests that the sports media endorses and perpetuates the “strive for distinction” norm of The Sport Ethic, and that all four aspects are present in some form.