

Deflategate: A dive into the scandal that degraded the GOAT

As the clock ticked to zeros on a blustery Northeast night in January of 2015, the New England Patriots secured their spot in the 49th Super Bowl in a game won 45-7 against the Indianapolis Colts. The victory helped the Patriots tie the Dallas Cowboys and Pittsburgh Steelers for the most Super Bowl berths all-time. What should have been a celebration of their dominance and historic accomplishment was overshadowed quickly by controversy. The victory resulted in a national scandal that would tarnish the Patriots' name for years to come and change the course of NFL history forever. In the first half, Patriots quarterback Tom Brady threw an interception to Colts linebacker D'Qwell Jackson. The interception not only gave the Colts possession of the ball but resulted in one of the biggest sports and media controversies in the history of the United States. Not only was this a controversy, but it displayed the innate power held by sports media outlets, the evolution of strategic communication in sports, and the fading trust that fans and consumers have in leagues, franchises, and journalism as a whole. While this scandal may have involved rules violations, the greater significance lies in how the media shaped and amplified the story through its coverage, and how the Patriots strategic communications staff responded to this. The scandal displayed the ever-changing relationship between athletics and the media that covers them, and how modern media has been sculpted into a matrix that pushes mass consumption of stretched information to the consumer. This paper will explore how Deflategate serves as a key example of the evolving relationship between athletics, public relations, and media credibility. By analyzing how Deflategate was communicated to the public, the strategically crafted PR responses of the Patriots organization and the National Football League, and the role of journalism as the basis of public perception, this paper will shed light on the great

influence sports communication professionals can have on an American society that is fully engulfed in a sports-dominated culture.

Although D'Qwell Jackson's interception didn't lead to any points for the Indianapolis Colts, it was the beginning of the scandal that would be dubbed "Deflategate". Immediately following his pick, Jackson handed the ball to an equipment manager so it could be kept as a souvenir for him. The manager noticed the air pressure in the ball seemed lower than normal, and Colts head coach Chuck Pagano was notified of the finding. The 12 approved game balls for the first half were subsequently replaced to begin the second half, which immediately sparked questions. Within days, Colt's media reporters had information about the allegations, and the NFL also announced that an investigation would be launched to get to the bottom of things. It was still Super Bowl week, however, and what should have been on the front page of news outlets was a pregame analysis of the Patriots and their opponent, the Seattle Seahawks. The scandal, however, was a main topic of question in interviews the week leading up to the Super Bowl. From the start, Patriots head coach Bill Belichick denied any knowledge of the situation, and it was obvious that the repeated questions about it were frustrating to him.

The league investigation, led by executive vice president Jeff Pash and attorney Ted Wells, took several months to conclude. What became known as "The Wells Report", was released on May 6, 2015, and contained hundreds of pages of information, interviews, recaps, and rules analysis pertaining to the rules in question. According to the report, investigators had concluded that, "In connection with the AFC Championship Game, it is more probable than not that New England Patriots personnel participated in violations of the Playing Rules and were involved in a deliberate effort to circumvent the rules." The report goes further in-depth, also stating specific culprits of the rule violations. It was stated, "In particular, we have concluded

that it is more probable than not that Jim McNally (the Officials Locker Room attendant for the Patriots) and John Jastremski (an equipment assistant for the Patriots) participated in a deliberate effort to release air from Patriots game balls after the balls were examined by the referee.” Not only were equipment personnel found liable for the tampering of footballs, but the report also mentioned star quarterback Tom Brady. The investigation, maybe most importantly and with the most implications, concluded that “It is more probable than not that Tom Brady (the quarterback for the Patriots) was at least generally aware of the inappropriate activities of McNally and Jastremski involving the release of air from Patriots game balls.” The global superstar and father of three was now officially mentioned in the report that would change millions of perspectives on his character, and the reputation of his franchise. Tom Brady was subsequently suspended for four games, and his team was fined \$1 million and lost two draft picks in the following years due to the findings of The Wells Report.

Once the media got hold of the report and stories began surfacing with conclusions about Brady and the Patriots organization as a whole, New England’s front office was outraged with how their name and brand image were being smeared. Not only outraged but swamped with the task at hand that involved answering and responding to all of the questions from outside media outlets. Less than a week after the publication of the report, the Patriots and their public relations department acknowledged the report with a persuasive communication rebuttal of their own. Their statement, released on “wellsreportcontext.com,” communicated to the public that the information contained in the Wells Report was incorrect, incomplete, and lacked context. This strategy employed by the Patriots reflects core principles at the root of sports public relations: responding to a crisis with strategic messaging and protecting brand image. Although the Patriots crisis management department may have not fully nullified the crisis, it did help to manage their

image, especially with the New England community and the loyal fanbase. In the months following the report, Brady and the Patriots attempted to appeal their punishments, but after unsuccessful attempts in the circuit court, they decided not to take the case to the United States Supreme Court. One of the additional arguments the Patriots organization stood on to refute The Wells Report findings was the Ideal Gas Law. According to the National Library of Medicine, the Ideal Gas Law is “an equation demonstrating the relationship between temperature, pressure, and volume for gases.” With relevance to Deflategate, the law “identifies the direct proportionality between pressure and volume at a constant temperature.” John Leonard, an MIT professor, wrote a detailed article explaining why he believes the investigation was flawed, and why Brady was innocent. He stated, “When a football moves from a warm environment to a colder one, its pressure decreases.” He also discussed the flawed pressure gauges used by the NFL referees to measure the balls before the game, and how based on his calculations, the lack of air in the footballs could definitely be from a measurement error.

Not only did the Patriots organization have to deal with the implications of the scandal, but the NFL and their league office had their hands full too. Deflategate eroded the key principle of trust that people have in American sports. Fans and consumers of these billion-dollar leagues believe that they can trust the organizations to which they pledge their loyalty. This trust was tested between fans and their favorite athletes, leagues and their consumers, and media and the general public. Many fans lost their trust in this scandal, largely due to the differing facts and opinions being amplified by the media. The NFL claimed that many of the footballs used were significantly inflated below requirements and league standards, but later contradicted themselves in The Wells Report, where it was found that some of the balls had undetectable differences. The media ran with the NFL’s amplified claims, solely because those headlines would look better.

Strategic communication again played a large role here, due to the fact that the NFL not only had to investigate the Patriots but also defend the integrity of their own league. An entire sports media economy had virtually been built in just a couple of weeks because of this scandal. It was commercialized immensely with endless breaking news banners, debate segments, and opinion pieces, all from outlets trying to profit from it. Sports media and journalism are like machines that will feed off of any headline, no matter what the truth is. Because of this, most people only see the headlines that they want to see. Due to the success of the Patriots, many football fans who were not New England faithful wanted to see them fail. This sort of confirmation bias was explained by Amanda Crawford, a professor at the University of Connecticut. When talking about media and news coverage, she explained how due to this psychological phenomenon, people will believe what reinforces their existing beliefs. Because of the widespread dislike of the Patriots for their success, media outlets and consumers ran with the fact that the NFL found likely tampering with the footballs. They failed to see both sides of the story and interpret all of the facts.

Due to media coverage, Deflategate quickly turned from a small rules dispute and controversy to a flashpoint in American sports culture. Networks like ESPN, Fox Sports, and countless others ran continuous coverage. This coverage questioned the legacy of the already-established Hall of Famer Tom Brady. The escalation revealed the innate power held by sports media, and how it isn't just a medium for reporting facts, statistics, and scores, but it is a force that can direct the sentiment of the public and frame narratives around athletes, franchises, and leagues. In a thesis published by the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, the sports media industry and several modern issues, including gender, race, and deceptive media were discussed. It was stated that "Sport is leveraged for compensation and manipulation. The definition is lost in

translation because the intent isn't about sports at all. To sports networks, "sports" are valuable leading the discourse to be used as coercion. Therefore, the definition is crystallized in its deceptive wording. To the public eye, it is a reinforcement tool, but internally, it is treated as a habitual expression to regain power." This excerpt describes the power held by media outlets and the ability that they have to coerce fans and viewers to believe certain narratives. Specifically, controversy in sports is what drives the largest amount of clicks, views, and therefore compensation for media outlets. This phenomenon can be described by Maxwell McCombs, a researcher and theorist at the University of Texas at Austin. In his agenda-setting theory, he describes how the media has a major influence on public attention. Outlets can set their headline agenda based on what will influence public perspective the most. Media can not directly dictate what audiences think, but they can dictate what audiences think about. This again displays the innate power held by the media and their attempts to live in the heads of the average consumer.

In conclusion, Deflategate was more than just a rules infraction and scandal about air pressure and football inflation. Deflategate was a monumental moment in defining the evolution of sports communication, sports journalism, and sports media. It revealed the power that leagues and franchises have in shaping the narrative about a situation, and it also displayed the capability of media outlets to amplify those narratives in whatever way they please. Deflategate tarnished the reputation of the NFL's golden boy in the eyes of many fans, and although it may never be fully confirmed what sort of tampering occurred, what is certain is the way this story unfolded throughout the eyes of the American public. In a world that is continuously evolving, with sports and media increasingly making their way to the center, Deflategate serves as a significant study, and potentially a warning, into how communications professionals must navigate the modern landscape that is sports media.

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