Message framing as institutional maintenance: the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s institutional work of addressing legitimate threats

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ABSTRACT

This research examined how a dominant sport organization (the National Collegiate Athletic Association) within an organizational field (U.S. intercollegiate athletics) addressed legitimate threats to its governance through the strategic framing of its public discourse. Through content analysis methods, changes in communication strategies were documented to highlight the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) responses to recent legal challenges to the organization’s rules regulating the compensation of college athletes in the U.S. In this regard, the NCAA first emphasized the harmful effects of potential changes to the institutional script, effectively denigrating the challengers. Then the organization justified its rules and institutional logics before finally re-institutionalizing its standard discourse, which portrayed the NCAA as a progressive organization that safeguards the interests of college athletes. This study provides further insight into how dominant sport organizations formulate defensive narratives to address contestations that may threaten institutional arrangements within a given field. In this regard, this research provides further insight into the process of message framing as institutional maintenance work.

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Fields have been characterized by active struggles wherein dominant actors seek to maintain power and favorable institutional arrangements, while the disadvantaged attempt to create more beneficial arrangements (Bourdieu, 1992; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These concerted activities within a field, whether disruptive or preservative, have been conceptualized as institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2008), and have represented a re-focusing of research in the institutional tradition wherein scholars should seek to understand how intentional activities impact institutionalization (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). These organizational field struggles, and the work of key actors to create, alter, and even maintain various institutional taxonomies, have been studied in assorted sport contexts (see Cousins & Slack, 2005; O’Brien & Slack, 1999, 2003, 2004; Washington, 2004; Washington & Ventresca, 2008). However, research of the strategies whereby sport organizations work to maintain power and legitimacy within their fields has been somewhat under-developed (Edwards & Washington, 2015).

Understanding institutional maintenance strategies within sport management is important for multiple reasons. Notably, various sport organizational fields have been shaped and defined through contestations of institutional arrangements.

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Particularly, the work of Washington, Forman, Sudbury, and Ventresca (2005) and Washington and Ventresca (2008) outlines how the organizational field of U.S. intercollegiate athletics and its governance has evolved through conflicts between key actors. Cousins and Slack (2005) summarized key struggles within professional sport in North America and how various constituents shaped the field. While much of this and other research of sport organizational fields have examined institutional change (see also O’Brien & Slack, 1999, 2003, 2004), understanding the defense and maintenance of institutional structures is also important for advancing theoretical development within sport management.

While explicit examinations of institutional maintenance work have been few in sport (for a recent exception see Edwards & Washington, 2015), previous research has outlined how sport organizations have managed to preserve certain institutional features and governance. For example, Washington (2004) documented how the NCAA had changed its rules and structures throughout the years in order to preserve its governance of U.S. intercollegiate athletics. Skirstad and Chelladurai (2011) outlined how one sport organization altered its structure to accommodate potentially conflicting logics, thereby minimizing the threat of damaging power struggles. Nite, Singer, and Cunningham (2013) showed how one university would embrace conflicts between athletic and academic logics as opportunities for growth and learning for athletes to mitigate possible tensions between academic and athletic stakeholders. Finally, Edwards and Washington (2015) discussed how the NCAA minimized the threat of losing players to the Canadian Hockey League by creating a program that emphasized the legitimacy of playing college hockey in the U.S.

Further, understanding institutional maintenance strategies is pragmatically beneficial for both change and maintenance agents. To upend institutional structures, research has shown that change agents recognize and exploit weaknesses within the institutional fabric (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Seo & Creed, 2002). Certainly, knowledge of maintenance strategies would be imperative for theorizing change. Conversely, maintenance agents would benefit from greater knowledge of preservation strategies, as this would provide greater insight into effective methods of defense. Indeed, the field of sport management would benefit from increased insight into institutional maintenance strategies to advance both theory and practice in institutionalized sport settings (Washington & Patterson, 2011). As noted by Washington and Patterson, sport offers a unique venue studying institutional theory given the highly public nature of sport information. The extensive media coverage of sport organizations and the public relations of controlling sport organizational narratives offer fruitful contexts for studying institutional work.

Organizational theorists have recognized the importance of media messaging within the institutional work framework. Especially with high profile contestations, message framing through public relations has been an integral aspect of both institutional change and maintenance work (see Hoffman & Ventresca, 1999; Lefsrud & Meyer, 2012; Sudbury & Viale, 2011; Vadera & Aguilera, 2015; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Framing, referring to the process whereby messages are crafted to influence an audience’s thinking (Chong & Druckman, 2007), can be a mechanism for persuading opinions, embedding norms, and constructing reality (Knight, 1999; Lim & Jones, 2010; Payne, 2001). In this sense, key actors shape media messages to emphasize desired messages in efforts to increase the salience of the desired schema with intended audiences (Knight, 1999). Considering that media representations have been shown to perpetuate institutional norms (see Duncan, 1993; Fink & Kensicki, 2002), it is prudent to examine how framed public messages may be an integral part of institutional defense strategies, as these likely constitute “practices in which institutional actors engage that maintain institutions” (Lawrence & Sudbury, 2006, p. 220).

This study was aimed at understanding how the NCAA strategically crafted its media messages to publicly defend institutional arrangements from legitimate challenges. Here, I sought to extend the conceptions of institutional work within the sport management literature by drawing from framing theory to explain how message framing is an integral process of maintaining institutional structures and power arrangements. This research was situated within the organizational field of U.S. intercollegiate athletics and consisted of an extensive content analysis of NCAA media. The focus of inquiry was the NCAA’s public relations campaign (i.e., press releases, media appearances, and statements to internet and print news outlets) in response to three recent high-profile legal challenges: Edward O’Bannon v. NCAA et al. (2014), Keller v. Electronic Arts, NCAA, and Collegiate Licensing Company (2013), and Northwestern University v. College Athletes Player Association (2014). Each of these cases represented legitimate threats to the NCAA’s established regulations. As such, the NCAA faced a significant crisis as its regulations were subjected to court rulings that could undermine its authority within the field and provide impetus for stakeholders to break from or demand substantial alteration of the NCAA’s governance. This led to a public relations campaign wherein the organization sought to defend its institutionalized authority and norms of operation. This research offers valuable insights into how a sport organization crafts its messages in attempts to sway opinions to conform to institutionalized norms within an organizational field.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Institutional work

Institutional work entails “a broad category of purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Sudbury, 2006, p. 216). Neo-institutionalists have generally conceptualized institutionalization as a process of self-reproduction of norms from societal routines and structuration with minimal regard for overt praxis (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Sudbury, 2008; Jepperson, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Micelotta & Washington, 2013; Sudbury & Viale, 2011). This notion of passive institutionalization has been resisted in the institutional work perspective, as
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