The Women’s Tennis Association and Media Framing of the 2018 U.S. Open Final

Teaching Notes

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Case Summary

This case study asks readers to explore the role of media framing for sports organizations and their athletes and events. Media framing reflects the choices made by journalists and other media providers as they select certain stories to cover and promote, thereby increasing the salience of these stories and creating business implications for organizational leaders. The case features a discussion of the Women’s Tennis Association and the 2018 U.S. Open final between Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka. This event represents an ideal story for examination, as it involves two female athletes and several controversial calls made during the match. Readers are asked to review the details of the event and subsequent coverage and assess the effects of media framing on this coverage.

Learning Objectives

Instructional objectives of this case are to:

- provide an overview of media framing as it relates to news coverage and consumption;
- examine the potential effects of media framing on media consumers and their discussions of news events, specifically with the 2018 U.S. Open final between Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka;
- explore how sports organizations such as the Women’s Tennis Association can address negative media coverage, while considering the potential business implications of their decisions.

Target Audience

This case study is directed toward undergraduate students completing courses in sport management or communications. Courses could include introduction to sport management, current trends in sport management, or sport communications.

Suggested Teaching Strategy

Instructors can begin the case discussion by having students outline the details of the U.S. Open final. Students could conduct an internet search to find related news coverage. As they gather these news stories, they could create a list of headlines. Students could submit their headlines, which the instructor could then collate into a single document and distribute to the class. The instructor could then ask students, whether alone or in pairs or small groups, to categorize the message(s) contained in each headlines, under such categories as (a) news (e.g., match outcome) versus commentary (e.g., assessment of player behaviors); (b) positive versus negative coverage and sentiments; and (c) favorable or unfavorable to Williams and favorable or unfavorable to Osaka. This exercise could help students to see both the range of stories and how the chosen headlines serve to frame the story and send a specific message to readers.

Next, students could conduct a similar exercise with social media coverage. Several of the Twitter messages included in the case used the hashtags #SerenaWilliams and #NaomiOsaka when discussing one or both athletes. Students could search for related tweets using these hashtags, collecting the messages found and classifying them based on the previously mentioned categories—or potentially create new ones as they emerge. This exercise would allow students to see the variety of social media commentary regarding this event, when it occurred, and how it developed over time. Students could compare the potential similarities and differences
in the frequency of categories between different kinds of media. For example, do traditional media providers offer more neutral coverage of the story by focusing on the event and outcome compared to individual social media users who offer more commentary and emotional response, favorable and unfavorable, on the event and coverage? This analysis could offer insights as to the potential relationship between what media providers offer and how individual social media users consume and interpret those details.

Instructors also could spend time discussing the ideas of framing. As noted in the case, media researchers have investigated framing and how it manifests in sport communication. Students could review one or more of the studies cited in the case. They could consider the findings mentioned in those studies, such as male athletes being featured more frequently than female athletes or the discussions about male athletes being centered on athletic performances compared to discussions about female athletes centered on physical appearance. They could use the information found in those studies and compare it to the details of this story: Do the findings align? What do the results suggest? How can media providers use this information?

Finally, instructors should review the Discussion Questions with students. The activities listed above add to the first discussion question, which asks students to review the headlines and social media commentary presented in the case. Students could find additional instances of both and discuss how they align with or differ from those included in the case. The second discussion question could elicit additional discourse. Students could look at the *Herald Sun* cartoon online (using the link provided in the Discussion Questions) and describe what they see. Additionally, they could search for and watch video clips of the actual match. Instructors could lead a debate asking whether students agree or disagree with the decision made by the newspaper leaders to support the cartoonist and his work. They could discuss how the cartoon itself was another example of media framing, whether they believe it reflects the events of the match as they unfolded or a different interpretation. The last discussion question asks students to identify how the WTA and other sports organizations could address the potential effects of negative media coverage related to their athletes and events. Instructors could have students search the websites of the WTA and other sports organizations to see what news stories they promote and how the stories compare to those published by media providers, whether the organizations focus on only positive stories or attempt to address negative news coverage as well. Students could discuss how the promotional efforts support or counter the various frames presented by the media. They also could explore the potential business implications of focusing on positive stories while avoiding those putting organizations and their events and athletes in a negative light. Through these activities, students should gain a more complete understanding of framing through the lens of the U.S. Open news event.

### Suggested Answers to Discussion Questions

1. **The idea of framing suggests media providers can influence media consumers based on what stories they choose to focus on and the headlines they select for these stories. How could the news headlines addressing the U.S. Open final have potentially influenced the social media responses included in the case?**

The case includes an array of headlines such as “Naomi Osaka upsets Serena Williams in controversial U.S. Open final” (Ubha, 2018), “Serena Williams unleashes furious rant to umpire as she loses U.S. Open 2018 final to Naomi Osaka” (Briggs, 2018), “Naomi Osaka captures U.S. Open; Serena Williams fined, penalized game for calling chair umpire ‘a thief’” (ESPN, 2018), “Serena Williams’ U.S. Open outburst leaves women’s Tour divided” (Rossingh, 2018), “Naomi Osaka defeats Serena Williams in dramatic final” (Marshall, 2018), and “Did Serena Williams go too far at the U.S. Open?” (Pontefract, 2018). Some of the headlines provide a straightforward portrayal of the event, indicating who competed and the outcome of the match. Other head-
lines use terms such as “controversial,” “furious rant,” “outburst,” and “dramatic” to increase the salience of the stories. These choices highlight the options media providers have when discussing stories as well as how their decisions could influence perceptions and interpretations made by media consumers. Some readers might focus on the actual sporting event and its outcome, while others might gravitate toward the penalties for code violations during the match and the responses by Williams to them. Using certain terms could influence consumer perceptions before they begin reading the actual story or make them assess how they feel about it.

Social media users reacted to the media portrayals. Evidence of this exists in the case with the description of the divided opinions in the commentary and social media posts about the two athletes and the match outcome. Some users emphasized their affinity for Williams, lauding her career and effects on the sport of tennis; others chastised her for what they perceived as an overly emotional and selfish display. Other users focused on Osaka, celebrating her first Grand Slam win and chiding Williams and fans for not showing grace and instead booing Osaka when she won. These news headlines and responses to the story provide examples of the different frames that media providers employ and promote, and that consumers perceive and consume. The social media commentaries suggest that media consumers view and respond information from media providers and potentially could be influenced by its presentation.


Beyond the event itself, perhaps one of the most controversial outcomes was the news cartoon created by Mark Knight of the Herald Sun. As noted in the case, the cartoon depicted an overly large and muscular Williams with exaggerated features jumping up and down. Beneath her are a broken racquet and a pacifier, suggesting the athlete engaged in an infantile tantrum on the court. A slender, blonde Osaka stands in front of the chair umpire, who leans down and asks, “Can you just let her win?” The news story included in the web link discussed the cartoon and the decision by newspaper leaders to support the cartoonist for this portrayal. Statements made by a collection of media personnel offered additional support for Knight and his cartoon. Their comments assert the cartoonist correctly captured the moment. Other voices included in the article expressed an opposing view, deeming the portrayal or caricature of Williams as derogatory and racist. As with the original story, social media users on both sides of the issue used platforms such as Twitter to express their views.

This cartoon highlights the role of media framing. The cartoonist chose to focus on this particular event, elevating its newsworthiness. Knight highlighted the actions of Williams, placing her front and center in the cartoon rather than depicting the end result with Osaka winning. Instead, Osaka, standing in the background, could be perceived as an afterthought. The depiction of the athletes also highlights the differences in size between the two, physically and in terms of their respective profiles in popular culture. Williams is an international star who commands the attention of audiences around the world, whereas Osaka, at the time, was less well known. The difference in size also plays to comments made about Williams noted in the case. The cartoonist plays to these assertions with the depiction and placement of Williams in the drawing. As such, the cartoon matches some of the headlines: “Serena Williams unleashes furious rant to umpire as she loses U.S. Open 2018 final to Naomi Osaka” (Briggs, 2018) and “Serena Williams’ U.S. Open outburst leaves women’s Tour divided” (Rossingh, 2018).
3. How could leaders of sports organizations such as the WTA respond to negative media coverage as it relates to their athletes and events? What are the potential business implications associated with these decisions?

The WTA and other sports organizations face the potential for negative media coverage regarding their events, athletes, organizational members, and other stakeholders. The case study provides examples of negative news stories about the U.S. Women’s Soccer and the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), along with the WTA. A WNBA proponent mentioned in the case study asserted that many sports featuring female competitors receive limited coverage. Journalists seemingly only appear interested in providing coverage when something sensational occurs, such as a fight between players, a feud between an athlete and the U.S. president, or the controversy surrounding Williams and Osaka during the 2018 U.S. Open finals.

These organizations could attempt to promote positive stories to media providers in the hope of at least generating more balanced coverage. This tactic is similar to attempts by corporations and politicians to generate positive news reporting, whether as the sole focus or to counter negative information appearing in the media. Corporations facing scandals in 2018 and 2019 included Boeing, Facebook, Volkswagen, and Wells Fargo (McNulty & Marcus, 2019). Candidates for the 2020 U.S. presidential race experience extensive scrutiny for controversial comments and other blunders (Nguyen, 2019). In these instances, organizational leaders and individuals attempt to provide explanations for these actions or promote different stories—for example, of engaging in corporate social responsibility, volunteering in local communities—to counter negative narratives. Potential implications arise with this suggestion, particularly if the organizations and individuals attempt to circumvent negative news stories in favor of more positive ones, rather than simply addressing challenging conversations head on.

The WTA could offer an array of stories about athletes such as Williams and Osaka, promoting what they have accomplished both on and off the court. Williams, as an international star and one of the greatest tennis players ever, female or male, highlights the diversity of the sport and the potential benefits associated with emphasizing and attaining more of it. Osaka, as a rising star, also embodies this diversity, and both Williams and Osaka have received sponsorships and media attention for their performances. WTA leaders could work to ensure the framing of their stories highlights the play and performances of these athletes rather than centering solely on controversial actions. Social media offers an opportunity to manage these stories, bypassing traditional media providers and reaching sport consumers more directly through content placed on popular sites such as Instagram and Twitter.

Again, potential business implications arise with these decisions. Addressing the business implications, the case provides evidence of the possible pros and cons of negative news coverage (Berger, Sorensen, & Rasmussen, 2010). Advantages could include increased exposure for the organization and its athletes. Greater sport consumption could translate to higher sales of related products. Disadvantages of this publicity could include backlash and boycotts as well as loss of playing time and endorsement contracts for the athletes. The potential financial ramifications could prove substantial for more marginalized sports and athletes. From an ethical perspective, organizational leaders might grapple with the decision to promote positive stories while attempting to minimize negative ones rather than addressing them directly. This choice could generate negative reactions from consumers, who might view these actions as disingenuous and not ethically sound. Thus, in handling these stories, organizations and athletes should be prepared for both the potential positive and negative effects of media coverage and the ways in which it could either elevate or detract from their organizations, events, and athletes, respectively.

References