

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of Communications

**MEDIA FRAMING OF THE DOUBLE-MURDER SUICIDE OF WORLD  
WRESTLING ENTERTAINMENT STAR CHRIS BENOIT**

A Thesis in

Media Studies

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

May 2014

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of various frames in newspaper coverage of professional wrestler Chris Benoit's double murder-suicide and how the crime was used by journalists in framing professional wrestling and the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). A content analysis of 133 articles from *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Associated Press*, *The Miami Herald*, *The New York Times*, and *The Sun-Sentinel* was used for the study. Articles gathered for the sample began on the day of the crime, June 25, 2007 to one year later. Crosstab analysis revealed that a frame that made performance-enhancing drugs central to the narrative was prominent in print media coverage. The use of a domestic violence frame was absent from the majority of news coverage used for this study. Professional wrestling, as well as World Wrestling Entertainment, did not seem to be framed negatively in relationship to the Benoit crimes.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

On Saturday, June 23, 2007, Chris Benoit was scheduled to appear at a World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) *Smackdown* show in Beaumont, Texas. He never made it to that show. However, Benoit did communicate with a colleague via voice message that he was not going to be able to attend the live event. He indicated via later phone calls that his wife, Nancy, and their son, Daniel, were ill with food poisoning. Benoit spoke with WWE officials and colleagues several times on Saturday. On Sunday, two WWE coworkers started to receive strange text messages from Benoit's phone. Those messages indicated his physical address and the location of the family dogs. The WWE tried to contact Benoit and local hospitals several times that Sunday, with no success (World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc., 2007a).

The coworkers who received the messages contacted the WWE on Monday to let officials know that something was unusual about the contact they had received from Benoit the previous day. At that time, the WWE contacted the Fayette County Sheriff's Office in Georgia to request law enforcement to check in on the Benoit household. Upon investigating the home, police found three dead bodies, one of those being identified as Benoit. Police immediately declared the home a crime scene. The WWE was informed of the situation at 4 pm, three hours before going on-air for a live weekly cable television show, RAW, on the USA Network (World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc., 2007a).

The WWE, with limited time and a lack of information, proceeded with a tribute show to Benoit that evening. Rather than doing this in front of a live audience, the WWE refunded ticket sales and canceled the live show. Vince McMahon announced that Benoit, his wife, Nancy, and their son, Daniel, were dead. Before the end of the three-hour tribute show, details began to surface that Nancy Benoit had been strangled and Daniel Benoit had been suffocated and Chris

Benoit was found hanging from a weight machine in the basement of the family home (Bronis, 2007). Meanwhile, police reported that Benoit had become a prime suspect in the murders. The following night on the WWE's ECW show on the SyFy network, Vince McMahon would retract his statements and the entire tribute show that aired the night before. The WWE promptly erased any content referring to Benoit from its website and removed all merchandise pertaining to Chris Benoit.

### **Purpose**

This study examines newspaper coverage of the Chris Benoit double-murder suicide through a content analysis of five newspaper sources to identify how journalists framed steroid use, concussions and domestic violence in the Benoit crime. Benoit had ten times the normal level of testosterone, as well as the drugs Xanax and hydrocodone, in his system at the time of death. Benoit's doctor, Phil Astin, admitted to authorities that he had prescribed testosterone to Benoit for medical issues in the past.

Concussions in the professional wrestling industry are prevalent. The issue of concussions among professional wrestlers, even those within the WWE, has been documented. Chris Nowinski, a professional wrestler for World Wrestling Entertainment, suffered from post-concussion syndrome in 2003 while working for the WWE and experiencing a severe concussion in one of his matches. It took only three weeks before the symptoms became so great that he had no other choice but to take a leave of absence from the squared-circle (Varsallone, 2007b). Benoit's father was so convinced that concussions had harmed his son that he donated Benoit's brain to the Sports Legacy Institute to research the effects of concussions on the brain.

There was also a documented history of domestic violence between Chris Benoit and his wife, Nancy. For example, they had a habit of breaking out in "operatic public fights that

embarrassed those around them” (Muchnick, 2009, p. 57). In 2003, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that Nancy Benoit had filed for divorce from Chris Benoit in part because of domestic violence and sought a protective order against her husband (Johnson, 2007). Soon after, Nancy withdrew the divorce filing to reconcile with Benoit. In 2006, Nancy was seen walking along a road, tousled and distressed. She told a neighbor that she and Chris had a fight where he threw her against the wall (Muchnick, 2009).

This study will analyze whether and how PEDs, concussions, and domestic violence factored into the framing of the Chris Benoit double-murder suicide. The study will then examine how the Chris Benoit crime was used in framing the professional wrestling industry in news coverage.

In a press release on its corporate website, the WWE stated, “WWE is concerned with the sensationalistic reporting and speculation being undertaken by some members of the media” (World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc., 2007b). The WWE implied that the media unjustly used steroid abuse to link the Benoit incident to professional wrestling and to the company in general. This was evident through the increased television coverage of the Chris Benoit crime. According to Johnson (2007), “It didn’t take long before nightly cable shows figured out that the Benoit case translated into ratings gold...” (p. 100).

Newspaper coverage is an important source of news and can sway public opinion. Understanding how journalists integrated steroid abuse and domestic violence into coverage of the crime, and then used the Chris Benoit case to frame professional wrestling, can aid public relations practitioners in the wrestling industry in responding to a potential crisis. This study will also aid in understanding what types of frames are important to journalists in covering domestic abuse crimes within sports.

### **Professional wrestling, Benoit, and news coverage**

Professional wrestling no longer lives on the fringes of popular culture. Individuals who do not watch can still identify pro wrestlers such as Hulk Hogan, “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, Brock Lesnar and John Cena. Around the turn of the century, professional wrestling became a part of carnivals that appeared around the United States (Brown & Bryant, 2006). The matches were fixed to avoid severe injuries to the wrestlers (Brown & Bryant, 2006). After 1948, major television networks began picking up wrestling shows because of their low-budget production costs and growing popularity. In 1925, wrestling promotions developed what were deemed territories. This was an agreement made by promoters to have exclusive rights to promote their wrestling shows in specific areas of the country. This system “would serve as the foundation of the business until Vince K. McMahon’s systematic destruction of wrestling regionalism in the 1980’s” (Beekman, 2006, p. 59). The World Wrestling Federation, a publicly traded company now known as World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), got its start in 1983 when Vince K. McMahon bought the company from his father (Brown & Bryant, 2006). McMahon has been credited with the creation of Pay-Per-View (PPV) events when he began promoting closed-circuit television in large venues. People would pay a fee and pack into theaters to watch the largest spectacle the World Wrestling Federation had to offer, “Wrestlemania.” This was not his first attempt at making money via closed-circuit television. He first tried it in 1974 when he planned Evel Knievel’s Snake River stunt (Beekman, 2006).

In 1993, McMahon began a primetime wrestling program on the USA Network that would change the wrestling industry forever. “Monday Night Raw,” the company’s flagship program, gave McMahon the opportunity to showcase his wrestling superstars on a live weekly broadcast to a wide national cable viewing audience. By 2003, Monday Night Raw became a



permanent fixture in the top-10 rated cable television shows (Brown & Bryant, 2006). According to one scholar:

While largely discounted as a genuine sport by most, professional wrestling has evolved from a minor source of “entertainment” to a culturally powerful multi-media complex, attracting audiences in abundance of fifty million viewers on a weekly basis. [It became] the number one rated “sports-entertainment” program on television (Atkinson, 2002, p. 1).

According to Nielsen data for the week of March 17, 2014, WWE Raw holds three spots in the Top Ten list for Cable Network television in the United States (The Nielsen Company, 2014). Further, WWE Raw is one of the primary reasons that the USA Network remains the number one ad-supported cable network in primetime (Kissell, 2013). WWE dominates in the male 18-34 age demographic and is a popular alternative to “Monday Night Football.” It has also expanded its brand to a film production company known as WWE Studios. This branch of the brand co-produces and produces theatrical and direct-to-home movies featuring various past and current WWE stars. In 2013, WWE also rolled out a reality TV show on the E! Network entitled “Total Divas.” The show follows a small group of WWE female performers inside and outside of the squared circle. Because of the popularity and success of the show, E! requested additional episodes for 2014. In season two, “Total Divas” averaged 1.3 million total views and 836,000 ages 18-49, making it one of E!’s most-viewed shows since 2011 (“Season two,” 2014).

With its consistent infiltration into popular culture and entertainment media, professional wrestling has gained a greater awareness than ever before in the history of the business. WWE talent can be found at award shows, in popular television programming and blockbuster movies, video games, in guest spots on MTV and VH1 television and even NBC’s “Saturday Night

Live.” In 2011, Chris Jericho, a top wrestler with the WWE, was featured as a contestant on “Dancing with the Stars,” a popular reality television show broadcast on the ABC network, where celebrity contestants are paired with professional dancers.

Even though the professional wrestling industry is popular in the mainstream entertainment media, it is usually absent from newspaper pages and television news programming. Beekman (2006) discussed the history of professional wrestling and the loss of respect for the sport once it became public knowledge that matches were staged. Soon the coverage of wrestling matches began to disappear from national newspapers, and even when covered it was with disdain: “Those newspapers that continued to note developments in wrestling did so in tones of condescension that suggested only the very young, the very old, and the very gullible attended the matches” (Beekman, 2006, p. 70). In the late 1930s, *The Boston Globe* suggested that wrestling was entertainment and not sport and was attended by “yokels” (Beekman, 2006). It was apparent that respect for professional wrestling among journalists was non-existent.

The WWE consists of two major championship titles (WWE Champion & World Heavy Weight Champion), two mid-card championships (Intercontinental Champion & United States Champion), a tag team championship and a women’s division champion (Divas Champion). These championships are pursued by a number of wrestlers through a series of dramatically narrativized events on TV and Pay-Per-View events. The outcomes of the matches, which are approved by McMahon, are carefully scripted by a team of writers. Even though the outcomes are scripted, the wrestlers must be strong athletes to be able to carry out the story live with little-to-no pre-choreography. As a part of the scripted nature of the WWE, wrestlers develop and take on various personas to help tell their stories. For example, a wrestler referred to as a “heel” takes

on the identity of a “bad” guy and would cheat to defeat his opponent. The opposite of a “heel” would be a “face,” a crowd favorite who fights with honor. These wrestlers work grueling schedules in different cities almost every night in front of sold-out arenas across the country.

The wrestling industry is not without controversy. In 1993, the WWE was engulfed in a steroid scandal that spread to the office of the chairman of the board. Vince McMahon was indicted on charges that he was distributing and encouraging steroid use among his performers. Hulk Hogan was a star witness for the prosecution but testified that Vince never sold him performance enhancing drugs. Ultimately a jury acquitted McMahon on all counts. Another controversial moment in WWE history occurred on the night of May 23, 1999, at the WWE’s “Over the Edge” PPV. The Intercontinental Champion, Owen Hart, was being lowered to the ring from the rafters of Kemper Arena in Kansas City, Missouri. The harness snapped and Hart fell 78 feet to his death in front of a sold out crowd of 19,000 and millions watching on live PPV. The WWE decided to continue with the event, which drew huge criticism from journalists and the public. Critics of the wrestling industry point out the early deaths of professional wrestlers, some addicted to pain killers and performance enhancing drugs. For example, they would point to the following:

- Eddie Guerrero, 38, died from arteriosclerotic heart disease due to abuse of alcohol, steroids and painkillers;
- Crash Holly (Michael Lockwood), 32, died from an overdose of painkillers;
- Road Warrior Hawk (Michael Hegstrand), 46, died from a heart attack from years of steroid abuse;
- Mr. Perfect (Curt Henning), 44, died from the abuse of steroids and painkillers;

- British Bulldog Davey Boy Smith, 39, died from years of abuse of anabolic steroids;
- Rick Rude (Richard Rood), 41, died from heart failure due to an overdose of Gamma-Hydroxybutyric acid (GHB) and steroids (Kaplan, 2007).

Beyond the negative focus on these early deaths, the raunchy story lines that push the limits of television and the perceived violence imitated by children have also been part of negative commentary surrounding professional wrestling.

### **Chris Benoit**

On March 14, 2004, Chris Benoit, a wrestler under contract with WWE, defeated the popular Triple H and the legendary “Heartbreak Kid” Shawn Michaels in a triple-threat bout for the World Heavyweight Championship. Chris Benoit had worked for several promotions before coming to WWE in 2000 and was described as one of the best technical wrestlers in the history of the business. The match was a suspenseful back-and-forth throw-down between the three men, with Chris Benoit eventually placing his signature finish, the “Crippler Crossface,” on a bloodied Triple H to become the World Heavyweight Champion. The match was deemed one of the greatest matches of all time, unfolding in front of a sold-out audience at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

As Triple H and Shawn Michaels made their way backstage following the match, Chris Benoit sat in the middle of the ring, tears rolling down his face staring at his new heavyweight championship belt in his hands. Colored tickertape fell from the rafters like rain onto the 20,000-plus audience who had just witnessed Chris Benoit’s first title win. Eddie Guerrero, another long-time professional wrestler and close friend of Benoit’s, made his way to the ring to embrace Chris. Guerrero would die a year later because of an enlarged heart from years of steroid abuse.

Chris's wife, Nancy, and his son, Daniel, entered the squared-circle to join in the celebration. Benoit kissed and embraced his wife and son as he held his new heavyweight title over his head in pure spectacle. The veteran wrestler would go on to hold a total number of 12 titles for the WWE.

On June 25, 2007, just three years after Benoit's first championship, fans who tuned into the USA Network for their weekly dose of WWE Monday Night Raw were stunned to see an empty arena and McMahon standing in the ring with just a microphone. He greeted fans:

Good Evening. Tonight, this arena here in Corpus Christi, Texas, was to have been filled to capacity with enthusiastic WWE fans. Tonight's story line was to have been the alleged demise of my character, Mr. McMahon; however, in reality, WWE superstar Chris Benoit, his wife, Nancy, and their son, Daniel, are dead. Their bodies were discovered this afternoon in their new suburban Atlanta home. The authorities are undergoing an investigation. We here in the WWE can only offer our condolences to the extended family of Chris Benoit. And the only other thing we can do at this moment is tonight pay tribute to Chris Benoit. We will offer you some of the most memorable moments in Chris's professional life, and you'll hear tonight comments from his peers, those here, his fellow performers, those here who loved Chris and admired him so much. So tonight will be a three-hour tribute to one of the greatest WWE superstars of all time. Tonight will be a tribute to Chris Benoit. (Dunn, 2007a).

Benoit, a former five-time world champion, had missed a live pay-per-view event the night before. Authorities discovered the bodies of Benoit, his wife and 7-year-old son, Daniel, in their home in Fayetteville, Georgia, on the afternoon of June 25, 2007. On its web site, the WWE

said it called the authorities after receiving several “curious” text messages from Benoit early Sunday morning (Goodman, 2007). With limited time before going live on the USA Network, WWE officials decided to air a tribute show to honor Benoit.

It soon became apparent that Chris Benoit had murdered his wife and son through asphyxiation before taking his own life by hanging himself using a cable from a weight machine in the basement of his home. Bibles were found placed beside each body, and no motive and no apparent suicide note was left behind (Bronis, 2007). After details of the incident surfaced as a double murder-suicide, McMahon addressed viewers on the company’s Tuesday night telecast of ECW, broadcast on the Syfy network with the following statement:

Good evening ladies and gentleman. Last night on Monday Night Raw, the WWE presented a special tribute show recognizing the career of Chris Benoit. However, now, some 26 hours later, the facts of this horrific tragedy are now apparent. Therefore other than my comments, there will be no mention of Mr. Benoit’s name tonight. On the contrary, tonight’s show will be dedicated to everyone who has been affected by this terrible incident. This evening marks the first step of the healing process. Tonight WWE performers will do what they do better than anyone else in the world. Entertain you. (Dunn, 2007b)

Suddenly, professional wrestling was on the cover of national newspapers and on every news program on cable television. The Benoit story “challenged the media’s view of wrestling like never before” (Johnson, 2007, p. 97). It was arguably the first time that the media had to take wrestling seriously. Previous to the murder-suicide, news reporting on professional wrestling had a “farcical treatment” (Johnson, 2007, p. 97). It is not the norm for professional wrestling to be

covered in national newspapers or national television news outlets, but as interest in the crimes grew, news programs such as “Anderson 360” and “Nancy Grace” began covering the story – with a significant increase in ratings. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism’s News Coverage Index, the case ranked eighth among network news TV stories for the week of June 24-29 by comprising four percent of the newshole, the amount of airtime or print space available to report the news (Johnson, 2007, p. 99). The sensationalism of the story also spurred a slew of books focusing on Chris Benoit, the wrestling industry and the murder-suicide. The same year the murder-suicide occurred, *Benoit* by Johnson, McCoy, Muchnick and Oliver hit bookstore shelves. *Dungeon of Death – Chris Benoit and the Hart Family Curse* (Keith, 2008), *Ring of Hell* (Randazzo, 2008), and *Chris & Nancy – The True Story of the Benoit Murder-Suicide & Pro Wrestling’s Cocktail of Death* (Muchnick, 2009), soon followed, keeping the story alive.

### **Coverage of the Benoit Crime**

As the stories began filtering through newspapers and television programming, steroid use seemed to become a focal point, at least in television coverage. Further, discourse surrounding injuries such as concussions in sports entertainment intrigued the public and targeted not only Chris Benoit but WWE and professional wrestling as a whole, and these storylines could be seen in television and online coverage. Benoit’s career spanned over a 22-year period, during which time he sustained numerous blows to his head from chairs, flying head butts, punches and kicks (Varsallone, 2007b). An examination of Benoit’s brain revealed that he had a neurological disorder called chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) caused by years of concussions sustained by constant head trauma, and this was reported by journalists. PEDs were also part of the narrative. For instance, on June 26, 2007, FoxNews.com reported that

“investigators said they found doctor-prescribed steroids at the scene, leading to the theory that ‘roid rage’ might have sent him over the edge” (“Chris Benoit,” 2007). Stories on the ESPN website entertained and pursued the idea of steroid abuse as a cause of the double murder-suicide before toxicology tests were conducted and publicly reported. For instance, ESPN.com reported on June 27, 2007, that investigators “want to know whether the muscle man nicknamed “The Canadian Crippler” was unhinged by the bodybuilding drugs, which can cause paranoia, depression and explosive outbursts known as ‘roid rage’” (“Steroids discovered,” 2007). News programs began to feature ex-professional wrestlers, most not directly connected to the Benoit case. For example, on June 28, “Hannity & Colmes,” a Fox News television show, gained 599,000 viewers for a show that included “Superstar” Billy Graham and Debra Marshall, the ex-wife of Steve Austin –220,000 more viewers than a typical broadcast (Johnson, 2007). Commentary usually consisted of the dangers inside the ring such as multiple severe concussions and the pressure on these performers to indulge in steroid abuse to get ahead.

The coverage surrounding the murder-suicide deaths of Benoit and his family went as far as gaining attention by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform that requested that WWE turn over information relating to steroid and drug abuse in the professional wrestling industry. In the request, the committee stated:

The tragic deaths of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) star Chris Benoit and his family have raised questions about reports of widespread use of steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs by professional wrestlers. These allegations – which include first-hand reports of steroid use by prominent former wrestlers – have swirled around the WWE for over a decade. Investigations by journalists have described a culture of performance-enhancing drug use in



professional wrestling, high fatality rates among young professional wrestlers, and an inability or unwillingness of WWE to address these problems (Waxman & Davis, 2007, para. 1).

When leaders of the sports industry were called by the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection to testify, McMahon was the only leader to decline the invitation, indicating his lawyer had a scheduling conflict. The WWE turned over 3,000 pages of documentation (“WWE to Committee,” 2008). Ultimately, the congressional review amounted to nothing due in part to the fact that U.S. Representative Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), the individual who requested the hearing, did not pursue the issue after changing committees (Lockhart, 2010). Issues raised in some coverage about the WWE and steroid abuse led Congress to take notice. However, the lack of follow up by Congress diminished the issue over time.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Although there are a number of books covering Chris Benoit and the WWE, there is little scholarly research on this particular event. One study by Borenstein (2008) discussed the media’s role in influencing public opinion in the Benoit case and the public’s perception of the wrestling industry through a very limited content analysis of articles in *The New York Times* and *Miami Herald*. Borenstein (2008) concluded that professional wrestling “received a reprieve by gaining mostly neutral coverage in the newspapers” (p. 47). A later qualitative case study by Walton and Williams (2011), published in the *International Journal of Sport Communication*, examined WWE’s immediate response strategy to Chris Benoit’s death (the tribute program) and the response strategy following further details revealing the Benoit tragedy was a double-murder-suicide. According to Walton and Williams (2011), “Organizations must gather all information

before responding. The findings from this study suggest WWE's initial response to the Benoit family tragedy proved to be premature" (p. 109). WWE's attempts to distance itself from Benoit and the issue of steroids as the core component of the crime failed (Walton & Williams, 2011). The WWE accused the media of sensationalizing steroids as part of the crime; however, the company was criticized after stating that steroids were not involved in the crime before toxicology reports became available. Walton and Williams (2011) concluded that a better response from the company would have been to acknowledge the rumors of steroid abuse by Benoit and to wait until autopsy and toxicology reports were released before making statements on what could have triggered the murder-suicide (Walton & Williams, 2011). This study will analyze a broader set of newspaper sources to identify how journalists framed the Benoit crime and to identify the frames that became prominent in the coverage. It will also analyze how journalists frame and interpret the professional wrestling industry.

### **Wrestling as a (violent) Media Spectacle**

Several scholars have examined professional wrestling from a sociological perspective. Professional wrestling has been described as a dramatic performance that can be compared to a form of entertainment, such as a soap opera (Mondak, 1989). Each drama is played out in the ring with a hero against a villain. Mondak (1989) explained "fantasy theme analysis suggests that some dramatic presentations may be so involving that audience members actually become part of the drama, sharing in a chaining process" (p. 139). Professional wrestling is one sport that loses authenticity when an amateur athlete moves onto the professional level and when the sport is more of a spectacle, where the athletes are paid by their in-ring style rather than performance (Mazer, 1998). Professional wrestling clearly provides cultural and counterculture themes of

masculinity and sexuality. The ideas of masculinity are played out through the art of superficial violence (Mazer, 1998).

In an essay, Sammond (2005) discusses the importance of studying the WWE as a marketing outlet and an entertainment vehicle in examining the rhetoric of social critics (journalists and media outlets). The essay also examines the WWE's responses to those criticisms and the cost associated with staging social conflict. Sammond suggests that in studying the controversial components of social issues such as race and gender that are associated with professional wrestling, it is also important to understand that these social issues are a reaction to the relationship history of network broadcasting and professional wrestling. When journalists and media organizations criticize and call for reform within the WWE, the response is that the media is ignorant, which helps the organization gain credibility among its fan base (Sammond, 2005). Sammond argues that through newspapers and magazines the debate continues over social classes and the performance of professional wrestling and its audience.

The topic of body image and "bigger is better" has been a long-time topic of discussion in the professional wrestling industry. Soulliere and Blair (2006b) conducted a qualitative study on 118 episodes of WWE programming that analyzed the commentary and images of the male bodies of professional wrestlers. The study concluded, through WWE programming, that the ideal male body was portrayed as muscular, physically powerful and large (Soulliere & Blair, 2006b). Within WWE programming "announcers frequently referred to male performers' body size during play-by-play commentary, especially those of large size" (Soulliere & Blair, 2006b, p. 274). The "hyper-male" body image portrayed in WWE programming can influence younger male viewers' ideals about male bodies and may cause body image concerns.

A professional wrestler's objective in a match is not to win, but instead evoke an emotional reaction from the live spectators and television audience. Smith (2008) analyzed backstage emotion work between wrestlers that enhances the ability to create crowd reaction. The study was conducted through ethnographic research over a three-year period at a professional wrestling school and the associated live event promotion (Smith, 2008). Wrestlers use "emotional contrast strategy" to evoke emotions from the audience. This strategy is when positive feelings or vibes from the audience are derived by negative feelings toward the opposing wrestler that shares in the "passion work" (Smith, 2008). Passion work is operationalized "in most instances of stage or ritualized violence that are organized around audience appreciation" (Smith, 2008, p. 174). The dramatic construction of a professional wrestling match in telling a story is commonly overlooked. MacFarlane (2012) examined the art-form of constructing the drama of a wrestling match and found that it is an ability that is mostly unexplored. The study suggested those "cultural and ideological framings of professional wrestling may be insufficient for a complete understanding of the in-ring wrestling narrative itself, as opposed to the surrounding spectacles and ongoing out-of-ring story-lines" (MacFarlane, 2012, p. 151). In another study, Jenkins (2005) analyzed the construction of individual matches, the athletes' "gimmick" or persona and its ongoing evolution inside and outside of the ring that can lead to a better understanding of professional wrestling. Sports entertainment, which refers to the world of professional wrestling in its theatrical framework takes on the structure of sport and enhances it to induce emotional and crowd responses (Jenkins, 2005). The wrestling within the WWE is "...a form which bridges the gap between sport and melodrama, allows for spectacle of male physical prowess (a display which is greeted by shouts and boos) but also for the explanation of the emotional and moral life of its combatants" (Jenkins, 2005, p. 38).

Kreit (1998) took an in-depth look at the popularity of professional wrestling, tracing wrestling from its beginnings to the scripted televised spectacle it has evolved to today. He suggests that there may be a correlation between social class, stereotypes and the fan base of professional wrestling. Kreit (1998) suggests that “empirical studies on the opinions people have of professional wrestling might be an interesting way to study class prejudices in the United States” (para. 113). In *Wrestling with Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in the WWE*, Danielle Soulliere (2006a) conducted a content analysis of 118 WWE programming and pay-per-view events to identify messages of masculinity to compare to the ideal version of masculinity. Soulliere (2006a) found “that the messages imparted by the WWE about manhood support the dominant hegemonic form of masculinity” (p. 1). It can be argued that masculinity plays an important role in professional wrestling for the athletes, as well as the audience. Ideals of masculinity influence in-ring personas taken on by the wrestlers. Male viewers may develop a perception of masculinity in terms of violence and body image, based on what they see in WWE programming.

Tamborini, Skalski, Lachlan, Westerman, Davis, and Smith (2005), in a content analysis of 26 hours of WWE programming, coded the frequency of violent interactions between performers, perpetrator characteristics, and related features (such as to the extent of which violence is used), the usage of weapons, the consequences and the reward of violence. They concluded: “Overall, violence in wrestling is not only unremitting but is more likely to be portrayed as justified, unpunished, and lacking extreme harm” (Tamborini et al., 2005, p. 216).

Further social and cultural research and analysis on professional wrestling can be found in essays by Roland Barthes (1972), Carlos Monsiviáis (2005), Heather Levi (2005), Douglas Battema and Phillip Sewell (2005), Phillip Serrato (2005), to name a few. By having a better

understanding of professional wrestling, it will contribute to the understanding of why certain frames may be implemented by journalists to interpret the wrestling industry.

### **Domestic violence in the media**

Domestic violence is defined as any violence between two people who share the same residence. The number of domestic violence accounts are compiled by the Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Bland, 2012). Abuse or death that is caused by a partner or person living in the home is considered domestic violence and a murder-suicide counts as two deaths by domestic violence (Bland, 2012).

The number of deaths attributed to domestic violence in the United States remains consistent yearly. About one out of five (16.3%) murder victims are killed by an intimate partner through domestic violence (“Domestic (intimate partner),” 2013). One in every four women experience domestic violence in their lifetime. Annually, an estimated 1.3 million women become victims of physical assault committed by an intimate partner (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2007). Women are 20 times more likely to be murdered if threatened by a partner with a gun. Campbell, et al. (2003) discussed the high risk of domestic violence turning into murders. Researchers led by Campbell created a danger assessment tool to measure the likelihood of a possible murder caused by domestic violence. When conducting the research “the study also found that almost half the murdered women studied did not recognize the high level of their risk” (Campbell et al., 2003, p.16).

Anderson and Umberson (2001) constructed an analysis of gender accounts of men and domestic violence. Thirty three domestically violent men were comprehensively interviewed over a year to identify their self-perspectives. The article attempts to identify male constructs within domestic violence accounts. The results of the study found that men rationalized and

minimized the loss of control in domestic violent disputes (Anderson & Umberson, 2001). Through in-depth interviews “they talked about women’s violence in a qualitatively different fashion than they talked about their own violence, and their language reflected hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity” (Anderson & Umberson, 2001, p.362).

Every year hundreds of stories are told through the mass media of deaths related to domestic violence. Bullock and Cubert (2002) conducted a study that explored coverage of domestic violence fatalities, the portrayal of the victims’ experiences and the social issue of domestic abuse within all newspapers in Washington State. Through a content analysis, Bullock and Cubert (2002) concluded that domestic violence is not properly portrayed by news media. They found that this was the case because journalists relied on non-personal sources (omitting information from people who knew the individuals involved) and used police frames. Non-personal sources do not allow the media to report on the humanizing nature of the situation and the people involved in the domestic violence situation. As a result, the researchers concluded that victims are often portrayed as responsible, and the perpetrators are often relieved of responsibility. Bullock (2007) also explored the framing of domestic violence related to fatalities in newspaper coverage in Utah. The study challenged the way journalists framed subordination of women and patriarchy in their news coverage. According to Bullock’s findings (2007), newspapers maintain a “strong patriarchal culture” which is evidenced by the way they delivered the content related to domestic violence deaths. Bullock (2007) attempted to study whether domestic violence was covered in Utah newspapers. She concluded that coverage appeared in only 18 of Utah’s 70 newspapers, and that seven of those newspapers ran only one domestic violence fatality-related article (Bullock, 2007). Bullock (2007) identified three news frames used in coverage of domestic violence. The first frame is a legal institution frame, whereby the

facts related to the crime were more likely to be reported in relation to the comments from law enforcement and legal officials. Bullock (2007) states that this frame highlights how the history of domestic violence related to the specific incident is less likely to be reported. The second frame posited that domestic violence victims are unlike other people, “suggesting something about them makes them more susceptible to being abusive or victimized” (Bullock, 2007, p.47). The third frame stressed that other stakeholders, for example, children, friends, and other family were impacted by the deaths related to domestic violence (Bullock, 2007).

A slightly older, but more in-depth look at news and domestic violence is Consalvo’s (1998) article, “*3 Shot Dead in Courthouse*”: *Examining News Coverage of Domestic Violence and Mail-order Brides*. Consalvo examined news coverage of the Blackwell murders that occurred in Seattle, which involved domestic violence and murder of a “mail-order bride.” Consalvo (1998) argued that the media used stereotypical assumptions about foreigners and women and presented the male perpetrator as deviant. According to Consalvo’s (2010) research, news coverage, specifically from “*The Seattle Times* reinforced dominant views about domestic violence--that men who batter are deviant or sick; that only some victims are innocent; that the woman is often blamed for what happened to her - and the issue of domestic violence itself was often erased by coverage” (p.207).

Maxwell, Huxford, Borum and Hornik (2000) conducted a study of *The New York Times*, *The Inquirer* and *Philadelphia Daily News* coverage of domestic violence during the O.J. Simpson trial. They wanted to see if coverage changed because of heightened attention to the case and the celebrities associated with the crime. Maxwell et al. (2000) concluded that reporting of domestic violence throughout the case increased, including reports of domestic violence that was not associated with the trial. After the trial, coverage related to domestic violence in the



*Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News* decreased. But *The New York Times* “maintained a level of domestic violence coverage consistently higher than in the pre-Simpson period by publishing stories that discussed legislative actions against domestic violence and provided secondary references to the issue” (Maxwell et al., 2000, p.269). Another finding related to coverage of domestic violence was that reporting remained incident-based and did not shift to a broader societal-level focus (Maxwell et al., 2000). This means that reporting did not focus on providing recommendations on taking actions against domestic violence. Ultimately, Maxwell et al. (2000) concluded that the “Simpson case’s framing effect was not strong enough to alter the quality of domestic violence related coverage” (p.269).

While there is a significant amount of scholarly research on domestic violence, there is no scholarly research on WWE and domestic violence and there is little on male athletes and domestic violence. Perhaps most related to the context for this study, Messner and Solomon (1993) analyzed newspaper framing of the coverage of Sugar Ray Leonard and his admission to abusing drugs, alcohol, and domestic violence toward his wife. Messner and Solomon (1993) analyzed coverage of the Sugar Ray Leonard scandal in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times* and *The National Sports Daily* over a nine-day period when the height of the coverage began. The researchers argued that “sports writers utilized an existing ideological ‘jocks-on-drugs’ media package that framed the story as a moral drama of individual sin and public redemption” rather than focusing on the domestic violence toward his wife (Messner & Solomon, 1993, p.119). They suggest that the ‘jocks-on-drugs’ frame was a norm among media coverage of athletes during this time. Further, Messner and Solomon posited that “the wife abuse story was probably ignored or marginalized because no such ready-made package exists for wife abuse stories” (Messner & Solomon, 1993, p.130). Messner and Solomon (1993) referenced

Kurz (1989) in an effort to showcase why the abuse story was disregarded. Kurz (1989) posits that the “wife abuse” frame does not exist because violence against women is extensively rejected inside and outside of several, if not all, athletic industries.

Berns (2004) discussed the frame of responsibility surrounding victims of domestic abuse that draws attention away from those who can intervene or avert the problem. People are warned to act responsibly and to stay clear from danger or to avoid dangerous situations. However, this inadvertently places blame on the victim if the abuse does occur. The frame used would posit that it was the victim’s responsibility to stay clear of danger and it avoids directing attention to any institution or individuals that could have prevented the abuse from occurring (Berns, 2004, p. 150). Berns (2004, p.151) describes the term *victimology* as the role of victims in violence and crimes for which the victim is blamed for their own victimization.

Webb (2012) examined policies and procedures employed by the NFL and MLB in cases of domestic violence and sexual assault. There are penalties for players who violate rules on the field and some sanctions for off the field conduct, but very little having to do with domestic violence. Scrutiny within both leagues on drug policies has become the central focus instead; for instance, “MLB has amended its drug policy at least three times in the last five years and twice in 2005 alone” (Webb, 2012, p.749). In June 2006, Brett Myers, a pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies, assaulted his wife outside of a hotel. Myers was arrested but his bail was soon posted by his wife, and he was released from prison and was able to play in the game against the Boston Red Sox the next day. MLB released a statement that “although it was regrettable, it was an off the field matter” (Webb, 2012, p. 250). Webb (2012) argued that leagues were hesitant in addressing domestic violence over concerns of lost revenue because of possible player suspensions. Leagues are also weary of suspending players before they are proven guilty in fear

of having to retract a suspension and lost wages. The researcher concluded that even though “the NFL and MLB have taken steps to address and deter incidents of off-the field conduct that may be detrimental to the ‘best interests’ of the sport, many of the existing policies and procedures do not do enough to combat league-wide issues of domestic violence” (Webb, 2012, p. 761).

Focusing on frames and domestic violence, Gillespie et al. (2013) used frame analysis of newspaper articles to identify frames of femicide (murder of female intimate partner) within cases of domestic violence coverage. Gillespie et al. (2013, p. 222) compared 113 newspaper articles that framed femicide within the framework of domestic violence against a second set of random samples of 113 newspaper articles that did not use femicide as a frame in domestic violence accounts. It is important to understand news frames and that journalists have the ability to frame the news in ways that influence public opinion or to influence change. The media can contribute to ignoring important social issues in the way they use frames in reporting. It was concluded that femicides were framed as a social problem in the context of domestic violence. However, “femicides continue to be explained away as commonplace or their magnitude is obscured by placing blame on the victim, failing to hold the perpetrator fully responsible” (Gillespie et al., 2013, p. 240). According to this research, the media failed to portray femicide as a larger public issue.

Sports columnist Dave Zirin (2014) is one of the few sports writers who has consistently been critical of the discourse around issues such as domestic violence in sports. For instance, he wrote a column in early 2014 about the NFL’s failure to recognize violence against women by its players. Darren Sharper, a former safety for the New Orleans Saints, now retired and employed by the NFL Network, was charged with sexual assaults by multiple women and accused of rape by nine. Also in 2014 Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice was caught on camera dragging

his unconscious fiancé from an elevator. Zirin (2014) observed that absent from media coverage was the description and language of “domestic violence”; instead, the emphasis was on the “legal troubles” of athletes. While the media perpetuate an image that does not include domestic violence, the league continues to add to the issue by not addressing the violence. For example, in the 2013 season 21 of 32 NFL teams had signed a player with a sexual assault or domestic violence charges on their record (Zirin, 2014). Zirin argued that the NFL’s handling of such issues reinforces a “blame the victim” framing around domestic violence and concluded that the issue of the NFL underplaying violence against women is a serious issue that the league and journalists must address.

### **Steroids in Media Accounts around Sports**

Steroids and performance-enhancing drugs have become an issue of debate in sports across the United States. Performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) are abused by high school, college and professional athletes. Approximately 2% of adolescents used steroids in the late 1980s (Bornstein, 2008), but in a 2012 study published in *Pediatrics*, Eisenberg concluded that 5.9% of adolescents reported using steroids (Eisenberg, Wall & Neumark-Sztainer, 2012). Most notably, during the 1990s Major League Baseball (MLB) was scrutinized for its athletes’ use of anabolic steroids with record-breaking statistics and dramatic body changes. This is an issue that continues in Major League Baseball even though testing for these illegal drugs was implemented in MLB in 2003.

Media coverage of PEDs, including steroids, has been a staple in sports sections in recent years. According to a study by Denham (2004), journalists responded to an investigative story by *Sports Illustrated* involving Ken Caminiti and MLB. Caminiti revealed to the popular sports magazine that he did in fact use anabolic steroids throughout his record-breaking season. This

prompted national discussion of which drug policies were enforced by MLB. When the allegation was made that the abuse of performance-enhancing drugs was the norm throughout the league, “mainstream newspaper journalists reported the story extensively both in the form of traditional news and in the form of sports columns” (Denham, 2004, p. 52). The large amount of news coverage of Caminiti’s admission to steroid use prompted policy-makers to push for mandatory drug-testing in Major League Baseball (Denham, 2004). In this case journalists covering the story helped elevate the issue of PEDs in baseball, which moved the issue forward.

However, news stories about PEDs are not neutral, and often advocate particular normative and cultural meanings about drugs and sports. Adam Bornstein (2008) conducted an analysis of *Sports Illustrated* and *The Sporting News* over a five-year period (2002-2007) to identify the different frames used in the magazines around steroids. He discovered three primary frames: “beneficial,” “warning,” and “social implications.” The “beneficial” frame focused on positive aspects of steroid use. The “warning” frame unveiled the implications of performance-enhancing drugs. The “social implications” frame reflected the trends and social consequences of performance-enhancing drugs (Bornstein, 2008). Quick (2010) investigated news coverage of steroids in professional sports on television networks ABC, CBS and NBC from 1990 to May 2008. Quick (2010) concluded that “the majority of this coverage framed steroid use as an illegal activity, rather than emphasizing the health costs of using these dangerous substances” (p. 254). He found that the news media was central to affecting audience perceptions of steroid use by concentrating on certain aspects of the issue.

Other studies have examined the attribution of blame around steroid use. McCollough (2006) conducted a content analysis of 362 articles from national media outlets to identify issue-specific frames in the media coverage of steroids in MLB. The study concluded that the majority

of news coverage used framing that negatively presented the individual player and not Major League Baseball as an organization. McCollough (2006) found that even though there was a significant difference in coverage between Major League Baseball consequences and Major League Baseball player consequences, both were treated in a comparable manner as far as the tone of the coverage.

The Benoit story indicates that PED use has been an issue in professional wrestling, and the topic has certainly been broached in journalistic accounts and in books focusing on Benoit. However, academic research focusing on news frames in coverage of wrestling has not been applied as it has been to coverage of MLB.

### **Attention to Concussions in Media Accounts**

The issue of concussions for athletes has been the subject of growing attention in recent years. The majority of United States professional sporting leagues, such as the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Hockey League (NHL) have some form of a league-wide concussion policy. The policy is in place to protect players from further long-term injury. In 2009, The Associated Press conducted a study of 160 NFL players and 30 of those players admitted to hiding any effects or symptoms of concussion (Associated Press, 2009). The NFL changed its concussion policy in 2013 with the hiring of an independent neurologist who would be unbiased by coaches and team players, to fully evaluate head injuries and to make the formal decision to either pull the player from the game or to have the player reinstated (Drummond, 2013).

The NFL, more than any other sports leagues, has been under the most scrutiny in relationship to the impact of concussions on its athletes. Kain (2008) conducted a study that analyzed the NFL's view on concussions against what the medical community believes the

repercussions are of these violent collisions. Scientific researchers concluded that concussions can lead to cognitive issues, depression and signs of dementia in the lives of athletes. On the other hand, the NFL has argued that if multiple concussions are treated appropriately and swiftly, long-term effects are non-existent (Kain, 2008). Dr. Bennet Omalu, M.D., a forensic pathologist at the University of Pittsburgh, studied the brains of three deceased former NFL players. He “concluded that Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (“CTE”) triggered by multiple NFL concussions represented a partial cause of their deaths” (Kain, 2008, p.699). In 2007, the NFL organized a Summit on Concussions. The hope was that the NFL would update its current concussion policies. However, the NFL denied the scientists’ findings and argued that fewer than two concussions did not cause permanent long-term issues for NFL athletes. In 2013, PBS Frontline ran a series called “*League of Denial*,” that highlighted the NFL’s downplaying of concussions and exposed what these brutal head injuries can do to players and their long-term effects. On this series Dr. Omalu, highlighted his research on CTE caused by multiple concussions in former NFL players.

Llewellyn, Burdette, Joyner, Buckley (2014) conducted a study of reporting rates of concussions in intercollegiate athletics. Most athletes are unaware that they have had a concussion because they do not understand the symptoms. These athletes believe that “bell ringers” or “dings” are not associated with concussions and are more attributed to being part of the sport (Llewellyn et al., 2014). Some athletes choose not to report a concussion even if they are aware of the symptoms due to the minimization of concussions by coaches and teammates. Despite the potential for long-term effects, “previous studies have suggested up to 50% to 75% of concussions may be unreported” (Llewellyn, et al., 2014, p.1). This study used 161 participants from 10 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Former student-athletes

completed a retrospective survey to collect data for the study. The study found that almost 50% of the student-athletes suffered from a concussion. About 22% of the participants reported having three or more concussions, and roughly 12% who suffered from concussions said they had not reported them. Most importantly “26.1% of respondents endorsed a potentially unrecognized concussion with most common symptom being ‘knocked silly/seeing stars’” (Llewellyn, et al., 2014, p.78).

Anderson and Kian (2012) examined concussions and masculinity in the National Football League. The researchers conducted a media analysis of the concussion suffered by Aaron Rodgers and his self-withdrawal following the head trauma. In football, masculinity is highlighted through self-sacrifice for the team, even when faced with danger of injury. The study found a “growing cultural awareness about the use of contact sports in promoting chronic brain injury” (Anderson & Kian, 2012, p.16). A shift in the thought process of youth athletes today, in a highly aware culture of potential serious injury, may also contribute to the change in logic that self-sacrifice may not be worth the glory. Athletes are additionally aware of the long-term effects of concussions and this can cause a shift in their perspective on masculinity and sport (Anderson & Kian, 2012). Perhaps the strongest evidence of the idea that the benefits of glory on the field may not outweigh the risks were in the publicized comments by President Barack Obama when asked about professional football and the risk of debilitating injuries such as concussions. President Obama compared the health risks faced by NFL players to those of smokers and said he wouldn't allow his son to play football (Uribarri, 2014).

Omalu et al. (2010) studied the brain of Benoit to determine how numerous concussions in contact sport can affect the brain. This was the first time a study of brain trauma was done on a professional wrestler. The group of doctors that studied the brain of Benoit found that he



suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). CTE is associated with contact sports and has long term neurodegenerative implications associated with the brain (Omalu et al., 2010). The doctors explain that “CTE may manifest with a broad spectrum and varying severities of cognitive, intellectual, and neuro-psychiatric impairment” (Omalu et al., 2010, p. 134). After studying Benoit’s brain the doctors concluded that he suffered from severe CTE after years spent in the squared-circle. Athletes who engage in contact-sports with a high probability of head trauma are more likely to suffer from CTE; however, not all professional athletes develop CTE (Omalu et al., 2010).

Although the research and media attention on concussions among high-level athletes has been intense in recent years there is a lack of research that focuses on media framing of sports, athletes and leagues around the issue.

### **Sociology of news**

The news media plays a significant role in the public by delivering important information both collectively and individually. The process journalists use to collect information and to report news is referred to as “news gathering.” Journalists make decisions on what they will report on and select the information that is presented. This can cause bias in the news that is reported on and interpreted by the public. The majority of society believes that news is reported with bias. Schudson (2003) defined bias as when “the reporter, editor, or news institution owner knows what the real event looks like, but will color it to advance a political, economic, or ideological aim” (p. 34).

Schudson (2003) explains that even though selection in news gathering implies that misrepresentation is a personal act by the journalist, it is more so that “they are socially organized distortions built into the structures and routines of news gathering” (p. 33). Flaws in

news gathering are a predictable pattern and should not be understood solely in terms of personal prejudice by journalists.

Entman (2007, p.163) categorized three meanings for bias in journalism. *Distortion bias* is when media distorts reality, *content bias* is when journalists favor one side over another and fails to report equally; *decision-making bias* is when the state of mind of the journalists is to provide biased content.

Editors and journalists choose when and how to report on events based on social and political ideologies. News executives formulate these decisions to reduce potential harm such as inciting a riot or framing a story about a war. Schudson (2003) determined that the idea of bias is replaced in the media by the idea of “framing.” The researcher defines framing as selecting or emphasizing information comprised of inferred theories of what happens and what is important (p. 35).

Gentzkow and Shapiro (2005) suggest that media organizations can seek to appeal to news consumers, to drive up demand for and consumption of content, in coverage. This can result in bias when reporting on newsworthy events based on the frames chosen by the organization to explain the story. Baron (2004) studied the media’s supply of biased news and the demand for the news by the public. “Ex post” is when individuals that read the news are cynical about the news because of awareness of bias in reporting. “Ex ante” can affect what news stories are reported on and what the contexts of those stories are which creates a bias in the news (Baron, 2004, p. 2). The study examined the cynicism about news by the public and its effect on driving down the demand for news and how for-profit news organizations viewed bias by journalists in news reporting and whether bias would continue with a competing media market. Baron (2004) concluded that journalists are capable of biased reporting if the potential to further

career interests were prevalent. For-profit news organizations allow for bias for numerous reasons, one being they are able to hire journalists at lower wages. The study found that “lower quality (more biased) news commands a lower price, but lower quality news can be more profitable than higher quality news” (Baron, 2004, p. 29).

Journalists and media outlets are obligated to keep credibility in the eye of the public but at the same time create profits for their organization. Reasons for bias can be based on patterns or framing the story for different agendas such as career advancement. Understanding the sociology of news and news-gathering can aid in interpreting why certain journalists may use certain frames in covering a story. In the case of the Benoit incident, steroids were a major topic of discussion and coverage by journalists during 2007, with the scrutiny being placed on Major League Baseball and steroid abuse. MLB was accused of turning a blind eye to PEDs being abused by its athletes with little to no policies in place to deter the abuse.

It is important to understand how journalists report on news and how different approaches may influence the frames used in telling the story. Understanding the sociology of news and using content analysis allows an informed understanding of coverage..

### **Framing as a Way to Understand Media Coverage**

Researchers have examined the ways organizations respond to crises and the media messages that may result from such efforts. An example, discussed above, is in the research done by Haigh (2008) on newspaper coverage and MLB player image. Haigh (2008) used coders to analyze the *frames*—the points-of-view presented as a general way to understand an issue in news stories -- that shaped the tone of newspaper coverage of the steroid scandal in baseball.

Framing theory is an approach used widely in the field of communications. As Tankard explains, “Framing recognizes the ability of a text – or a media presentation – to define a

situation, to define the issues, and to set the terms of a debate” (Tankard, 2001, p. 96).

Additionally, “the concept of framing consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text” (Entman, 1993). Journalists, publicists and politicians use framing as a way to define an issue and to prompt a cognitive component from the receiver of the message. It is commonly understood as influencing or swaying public opinion one way or another. For example, defining same-sex marriage as an issue concerning the sanctity and definition of marriage raises a certain set of emotions, religious beliefs, perspectives and values. However, defining same-sex marriage as an issue concerned with civil liberties impacts public opinion with a completely different set of values, emotions and beliefs.

Entman (1993) presents frames as a form of communication that can influence a person’s consciousness of reality. He defines frames as a way “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993 p. 52). The frames that journalists use can sway public opinion by shaping social debates to emphasize (or deemphasize) elements of an issue. Dominick and Wimmer (2003) stated that framing is messaging used by the media to portray a particular issue at hand by repeating exposure of certain elements of an event or issue. In terms of the media reinforcing the message, the receiver becomes aware of the issue in terms of the media messaging. Chong and Druckman (2007) defined framing as a small shift in the message by the communicator that produces sometimes large changes in the opinion of the receiver. Framing has become a powerful tool in the field of communications in assisting the media in influencing support or lack thereof for certain social issues or news stories.

De Vreese's (2005) study further analyzes framing theory by breaking down the paradigm into two processes: frame-building and frame-setting. *Frame-building* refers to the foundation on which news frames are built. Journalists and factors within news organizations influence the way issues are framed in the media. *Frame-setting* refers to the news frames and the way those frames communicate with the audience's prior knowledge of the issues. Framing is "part of the journalistic packaging of events in a broader social and historical context as well as individuals' attempt to interpret news in terms of their own lives" (De Vreese, 2005, p. 60).

The use of framing here will act as a way to gauge news coverage and how it influenced the public opinion of the frames surrounding the Chris Benoit double-murder suicide and the WWE.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The examination of frames and themes in media coverage of events and organizations is often investigated through research that employs content analysis. According to the *Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*, "[c]ontent analysis involves the systematic coding of information in archival records. It is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within a set of texts" (Christie, 2007, p. 176). This method encompasses a process where coding categories are established to be used on text sources that relate to or contain information related to the research questions. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) defined two approaches to content analysis in frames used in the news media: inductive and deductive. The inductive approach involves analyzing a news story with an open view to attempt to reveal the array of possible frames, beginning with very loosely defined preconceptions of these frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 94). Inductive content analysis can assist researchers in defining the various ways issues in the news can be framed. This approach can be time

consuming, difficult to replicate and usually includes a small sample. The second approach, defined as deductive content analysis, is a more structured approach. This method involves “predefining certain frames as content analytic variables to verify the extent to which these frames occur in the news” (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 94). By using this approach the frames being researched must be clear in order for the frames to be identified and not overlooked. The deductive approach is beneficial because it is easy to replicate and the sample size can be small-to-large for the purposes of the study. There is enough previous research on issues around domestic violence and steroid use, among other issues, that frames for this study can generally be pre-identified, making a deductive approach feasible.

Content analysis can be useful in determining or focusing on important trends, patterns and/or themes found in several forms of recorded communication (e.g. verbal, print or electronic resources). It is particularly functional when a study involves a large quantity of recorded communication (Christie, 2007). An additional benefit to the use of content analysis as a research method is that “it can reveal evidence and patterns that are difficult to notice through casual observations” (Christie, 2007, p. 176). It is important to note that content analysis describes the content of a message or frame. It “provides the researcher with the manifest message content, which may lead to future research on the latent meaning of that content” (Hocking, Stacks & McDermott, 2003, p. 189).

There are limitations for using content analysis as a research method. For example, it is necessary to select categories that are suitable for the data (Christie, 2007). While researchers need to correctly define the coding categories, they also need to be aware of their own biases associated with the collection of texts/resources, the creation of coding categories, analysis and the interpretation (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). Researcher bias can influence the body of

information to which they are contributing due to the desire to use the data to present “inferential conclusions” (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991).

### **Method and Research Questions**

This paper will attempt to analyze steroid use, domestic violence, concussions and the frames used to cover the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide and how those frames then helped journalists define the wrestling industry. Journalists have always struggled with how to effectively report on professional wrestling. Newspapers today lack coverage of wrestling; however, the tremendous popularity of the sport is hard to ignore. This study will be completed through the use of content analysis, informed by frames and themes identified in previous research around issues of steroid use and domestic violence. Special attention will be paid in the analysis to the ways coverage of PEDs and domestic violence interact and relate and how those frames translate to the way professional wrestling is presented by journalists.

In analyzing the messages in print media related to Benoit and professional wrestling, this paper will attempt to answer two general research questions using content analysis:

RQ1: How were factors such as steroid use, concussions and domestic violence used in the framing of the Benoit double murder-suicide?

RQ2: How was the Benoit double murder-suicide, then, used in the framing of professional wrestling?

Any articles mentioning steroid use, concussions and domestic violence that directly referenced Chris Benoit or the details of the Benoit crime were structured under RQ1. Articles that mentioned steroid use, concussions, domestic violence and the Benoit crime that made direct reference to the WWE or to the professional wrestling industry were structured under RQ2.

Newspapers used for this study consisted of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, where the Benoits resided and where the crime took place; *The Associated Press (AP)*, for its national reach; *The Miami Herald* and *The Sun-Sentinel*, because Nancy Benoit was from Florida and Nancy and her son Daniel were buried in the state; and *The New York Times*, for its national reputation and influence. The search term “Chris Benoit” was used to search the NewsBank databases for articles from the date of the crime, “June 25, 2007,” to one year out, “June 25, 2008,” to gather the sample for this content analysis. After duplicates were removed, 133 articles were used in the sample for the content analysis.

### **Coding Scheme**

Variables relating to journalists’ recounting of events and their emphasis on elements of those events as relating to domestic violence and to steroid abuse were designed to be part of the coding scheme. Variables that account for their choices around the presentation of the WWE, professional wrestling, and the background of Chris Benoit were included. Examples of such variables are embedded in the following questions: Are PEDs mentioned in coverage? Is domestic violence (and Benoit’s history) mentioned? Are experts in domestic violence quoted in the articles? Are doctors who are experts on performance-enhancing drugs quoted in the articles? What factors are related to Benoit’s crimes? How is the WWE presented as an organization? How is professional wrestling presented?

A codebook with 27 variables related to the topics of PEDs, domestic violence, use of sources, and the time frame for stories, for instance, was created to answer the research questions, and all 133 articles were used in the content analysis, after duplicates were removed. After several practice sessions, two coders coded 10% of the 133 newspaper articles for inter-



coder reliability. Overall reliability was 94% across all variables, using Holsti's formula to calculate reliability.

#### **Chapter 4: Findings**

Newspapers ran varying numbers of stories and different types of stories. In this study, there are 15 *The New York Times* articles, 46 articles in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 29 articles in *The Miami Herald*, 4 articles in *The Sun-Sentinel*, and 39 articles from the *Associated Press*, which were published in the sample newspapers and in newspapers across the country. Within the sample of newspapers, each publication had various combinations of different types of stories. There were five types of stories: feature, news, opinion (op-ed), sports, and other. For example, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* had significantly more news articles than any of the other four newspapers, with 43 (43.3%) articles. Because the murder-suicide occurred in Atlanta this would be the cause for the significant news coverage in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. The *Associated Press* followed with 34 (34.3%) of news stories.

Out of the 133 articles in the sample, 38 (28.6%) of the articles ran within the first week of the incident, 30 (22.6%) articles ran within one month of the incident, 32 (24.1%) articles ran between one month and three months, 16 (12%) articles ran between three and six months, and 17 (12.8%) articles ran at six months or more (see Appendix B: Table 1). The double murder-suicide was clearly reported on more within the initial week to three months of the incident. After the three-month time frame, the number of articles decreased significantly. The spike in articles that ran between one month and three months is due to the release of toxicology reports.

**RQ1: How were factors such as steroid use and domestic violence used in the framing of the Benoit double murder-suicide?**

Chris Benoit killed his wife, Nancy, and his son, Daniel, before killing himself. His victims – his wife and son – were mentioned in stories immediately after the crimes, but their mentions then trailed off. Nancy Benoit was mentioned most often in stories (about 70%) within one week of the incident, but as time passed, she was less likely to be mentioned. For example, three-quarters of the stories three months out from the incident did not mention her by name.

Even in stories that mentioned Nancy Benoit after her murder, most did not discuss the couple's history ( $X^2=6.828$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). Out of a total of 57 articles that mentioned Nancy, only 10 (17.5%) mentioned the history of domestic violence. The remaining 47 (82.5%) mentioned Nancy but do not mention a history of domestic violence. For example, Varsallone (2007a) wrote in a news story in *The Miami Herald* that “Nancy filed for divorce in May 2003, claiming alleged cruel treatment. Three months later she dropped the divorce and a request for a restraining order in which she charged Benoit had threatened her and broken furniture in their home” (para. 14). While this quote is an example of one of the 10 articles that mentions Nancy and the history of domestic violence it is important to note by the citation that the reference was buried in the article.

Content analysis found that steroid use was presented as much more the contributor to the double murder-suicide than was a history of domestic violence in the Benoit household. Other factors were also a part of the framing of the crime. Based on chi-square analysis, there is statistical significance between the type of newspaper article and whether the article mentioned or highlighted the role of domestic violence in the Benoit household ( $X^2=12.198$ ;  $df=3$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). The article type that most often included a mention of domestic violence was op-ed articles, which included staff-written editorials, columns, and letters to the editor. Out of 10 op-ed articles, four (40%) of the articles mentioned the term domestic violence. For example, Seeliger

(2007) wrote in a letter-to-the-editor published in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, “When articles like this are written eulogizing a killer, it discourages the community from looking more favorably on the plight of the victim of violence. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* needs to review the process by which it examines the issue of domestic violence”(p. A19). Ultimately, it appears that regardless of type, however, the history of domestic violence did not play a major role in the articles. Opinion editorials allowed the public to consider the role of domestic violence in the Benoit crime and can serve as a supplement to journalist-produced stories that ignored the domestic violence factor.

Mention of Chris Benoit’s medical information was also often in news and sports articles, and less in feature and op-ed articles ( $X^2=15.080$ ;  $df=3$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). Nine (60%) of the articles in *The New York Times* 27 (69.2%) of the *Associated Press* articles, and more than half of the articles published in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* provided some element of Benoit’s medical history ( $X^2=14.047$ ;  $df=4$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) (See Appendix B: Table 2). An example of the way his medical history was typically presented is found in this excerpt from *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: “Astin [a physician] had prescribed a ten month supply of anabolic steroids to Benoit every three to four weeks between May 2006 and May 2007” (Hollis, 2007b, p.B1).

Initially after the incident (within one week), medical information was mentioned in 10 (26.3%) of the articles. Overall, after that initial period, the mention of medical information increased. For example, it was mentioned in 21 (70%) of the articles within one month of the incident. Medical information was included in news reporting in 17 (53.1%), a little more than half of the articles within the greater than one month/less than three month timeframe of the incident. About three-quarters 12 (75%) of the articles mentioned medical information within the greater than three month/less than six month timeframe of the incident because of the focus on

Benoit's doctor, Phil Astin, who was being investigated and prosecuted for his role in prescribing medication. For instance, as reported by the *Associated Press*, "Authorities have said Astin prescribed a 10-month supply of anabolic steroids to Benoit every three to four weeks for a year leading up to the killings" (Weber, 2007a, para. 2). News coverage linked to "events" and official sources were followed specifically by journalists.

In articles that detailed Benoit's crimes and medical information, 33 (66%) mentioned crime details within the same newspaper report ( $X^2=6.399$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). An example of this can be found in the following quote from an *Associated Press* article: "Benoit, 40, strangled his wife with a cord, used a choke hold to strangle his 7-year old son, placed bibles next to the bodies and hanged himself on a piece of exercise equipment" (Weber, 2007b, para. 7). This quote, which emphasizes crime detail, is trailed later in the same article by the following, "Benoit had roughly 10 times the normal level of testosterone in his system when he died" (Weber, 2007b, para. 9).

The popular slang term "roid rage," sometimes used in the mainstream media in relationship to crimes by athletes, such as Oscar Pistorius, was seldom used in comparison to the mention of Benoit's medical information, including the mention of prescribed PEDs, in relationship to the murder-suicide. Articles in three news sources, *The New York Times* nine (60%), *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 24 (52.2%), and the *Associated Press* 27 (69.2%) discussed, speculated about or documented Benoit's medical information including the prescribed anabolic steroids. However, not nearly as many stories from these same papers used the term "roid rage." The term "roid rage" was only mentioned in three (20%) of *The New York Times* articles and four (8.7%) of the articles in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Additionally, it was only mentioned in seven (21.4%) of the articles in *The Miami Herald* and one (25%)

article in *The Sun-Sentinel*. However, the *Associated Press* used the term “roid rage” in 20 (51.3%) of its stories (“Roid rage” is not an entry in the *Associated Press* Stylebook) (See Appendix B: Table 3).

Part of the framing of the Benoit murder-suicide involves the frequencies related to who was quoted in the articles used for this study. Attorneys were quoted most frequently, in 57 (43%) of the articles. The next most frequently quoted individuals fall into the “other” category with 43 (32%) of articles. “Others” are people who are not attorneys, family members, WWE officials, law enforcement, medical experts or wrestlers. Law enforcement was quoted in 34 (26%) of the articles, followed closely by WWE officials who were quoted in 32 (24%) of the articles. Family members, both Nancy’s and Chris’s, were quoted in 29 of the 133 stories (21.8%), and many of these quotes were in relationship to disputes over the estate or from Chris’s father about his shock at his son’s crimes. Medical experts were quoted in 26 of 133 articles (20%). References from wrestlers are the least common: Out of 133 articles, they were quoted only eight times (6%). It is significant to note that journalists in this sample did not quote domestic violence experts.

PEDs were consistently mentioned regardless of timeframe and type of article, and their mention climbed over time. Within one week of the incident, PEDs were mentioned in 21 (55.3%) of the stories. Their mentions increased; within one month they were mentioned in 26 (86.7%) of the stories, and by three months from the incident they were mentioned or discussed at length in all stories ( $X^2=17.705$ ;  $df=4$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). An example of PEDs being mentioned in a story at least three months after the incident can be found in *The Sun-Sentinel*. The article states, “Steroid use has lingered as a theory behind the killings because anabolic steroids were found in

Benoit's home and tests conducted by authorities showed Benoit had roughly 10 times the normal level of testosterone in his system when he died" (Weber, 2007c, para. 5).

**RQ2: How was the Benoit double murder-suicide, then, used in the framing of professional wrestling?**

The use of painkillers and other drugs, including PEDs, was generally introduced and discussed in the context of professional wrestling. For instance, the majority of feature articles encompassed opinions of professional wrestlers and those associated with the wrestling industry who talked about the use of painkillers. In an article printed in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Hollis (2007a) interviewed former professional wrestlers on the sport's culture and asserted that the process of making up for or "compensating" for wrestling demands by wrestlers "often comes from pain killers, muscle relaxers, steroids, tranquilizers and alcohol. Usually, wrestlers will take a cocktail of several drugs at once" (p.D1).

PEDs were mentioned in 55 (69.6%) of articles that also mentioned the WWE ( $X^2=5.443$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). In part, this was because of results of a drug test the WWE released after the crime. In an article by the *Associated Press*, "World Wrestling Entertainment last screened Benoit for steroids in April. It said the results released Tuesday were proof Benoit did not test positive for illegal substances" (Bluestein, 2007, para. 14). However, stories that did *not* mention the WWE also mentioned or discussed PED use at a high rate: 102 of the 133 articles used in this study included a mention of PEDs. In other words, PED use was not necessarily tied to the WWE, but seemed to be tied to the sport of professional wrestling. For example, Newberry (2007) in an article written for *The Associated Press*, wrote, "Steroids and other muscle-building drugs long have been an accepted part of the wrestling culture, allowing the biggest names to pump up to ungodly proportions that wouldn't be possible through natural means" (para. 25). As

can be seen in this example, WWE was not directly referenced in the quote; instead the journalist mentioned only pro wrestling.

In relation to the Benoit crime, *The Associated Press* reported, “Benoit’s father believes years of head trauma his son suffered while in the ring contributed to the killings. Doctors affiliated with the Sports Legacy Institute, who examined Benoit’s brain, have said that repeated concussions could have contributed to the killings” (Weber, 2007b, para.11). Of the 133 articles, only 19 (14.3%) mention concussions, and 114 (85.7%) of the articles do not mention concussions (See Appendix B: Table 4). In addition, crosstab analysis found that regardless of time frame, concussions were rarely mentioned. For example, within one week of the incident concussions were only mentioned two (5.3%) times, within one month concussions were also only mentioned two (6.7%) times, in the greater than one month less than three month time frame concussions were mentioned seven (21.9%) times, in the greater than three months less than six month time frame concussions were mentioned five (31.3%) times, and in the greater than six month time frame concussions were mentioned three (17.6%) times. Further, of the articles that mention WWE, only 15 (19%) also mentioned concussions ( $X^2=3.513$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p<0.05$ ).

Substances such as painkillers, although linked to professional wrestling, were also not necessarily explicitly linked to the WWE. The WWE was mentioned in 34 (89.5%) of articles written within one week of the incident ( $X^2=21.115$ ;  $df=4$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). Within one month of the incident, however, only 12 (40%) of the stories mentioned the WWE. There was a slight increase – to about half the stories – after one month, but it never climbed back to the rate it showcased during the first week.

Vince McMahon, WWE Chairman and CEO, was not prominent in coverage: out of 99 news articles he was only mentioned in 12 (12.1%). Among types of articles, he was mentioned most often in news articles ( $X^2=12.235$ ;  $df=3$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). When the crime occurred, McMahon made statements on behalf of the WWE, which drew news coverage. Later, mentions of McMahon dropped off. McMahon was not mentioned in any article that did not also discuss the WWE.

### **Chapter 5: Discussion**

Based on the findings in this study, there are several possible conclusions. The WWE was not, as an organization, framed negatively in overall coverage, but received more neutral coverage. Early in the timeline of events Vince McMahon and the WWE were mentioned because of Benoit's employment with the company, which is evidenced by the fact that WWE officials made the initial call to law enforcement to check on the Benoit household, and Vince McMahon's comments made on "WWE RAW," June 25, 2007; "ECW," June 26, 2007; and the "Today Show," June 28, 2007. Following the initial call to the authorities and the three mentions on television, there was little to no comment from the organization and the CEO, and the organization seemed to escape criticism for its silence. Therefore, any reason to mention World Wrestling Entertainment and Vince McMahon diminished as stories on the crimes progressed. It also seems that journalists used WWE and Vince McMahon as equal entities when covering the Benoit tragedy. In most instances, the WWE and Vince McMahon were mentioned within the same article but rarely independent of each other (McMahon was never mentioned without the WWE). The only time steroids were associated with the WWE was through articles that mentioned congressional hearings probing for information pertaining to WWE's wellness policy



and steroids and when the WWE officials mentioned that Chris Benoit passed a random drug test in April of 2007.

This is not to say that professional wrestling as a sport was not framed in negative terms and linked to the Benoit crime. The use of PEDs seemed to be tied to the sport of professional wrestling through their mention in many articles that speculated on their role in the Benoit crimes. Articles involving interviews with former and current professional wrestlers made reference to PEDs when discussing the business of professional wrestling. The data clearly indicated that PEDs are a consistent presence in relation to the media's coverage of the Benoit incident. This is important in relationship to the first research question, as PEDs seemed to be the focus for journalists in framing his crimes and suicide. Much like the findings of research on media coverage of Sugar Ray Leonard, "jocks on drugs" seems to have been the framing device used by journalists to explain Benoit (Messner & Solomon, 1993).

It can be argued through statistical data that journalists did not focus on concussions as much as they did on the PEDs. Some articles referenced concussions as a possible cause for the crimes. In an article by *The Miami Herald*, (Varsallone, 2007b) mentioned that Chris Benoit may have suffered chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), "which occurs in people who have suffered multiple concussions, commonly manifests as dementia or declining mental ability and parkinsonism or tremors and lack of coordination" (para. 6). It is evident from the sociology of news research, as well as the results of this study, that journalists selectively choose from sources and information points when reporting, resulting in the framing of news events in ways that highlight some elements and downplay others. This can be seen in the crosstab analysis of Nancy Benoit and domestic violence, and concussions and the WWE. For example the findings of this

study show that domestic violence was not a frame used by journalists in the coverage of the Chris Benoit double-murder suicide.

### **Missing the story?**

Even though there was a clear documented history of domestic violence, including statements in legal documents that had been filed by Nancy Benoit, domestic violence was not a central frame used to explain the murders committed by Chris Benoit. Domestic violence as an issue was minimized and never became a focal point of reporting for journalists. The sources quoted in the reporting of the crime consisted mostly of attorneys and non-personal sources.

Bullock (2007) identified a frame called the “legal institution frame” where facts related to the crime were more likely to be reported in relation to law enforcement and legal officials. It is evident that this frame was used in the coverage of the Benoit double murder-suicide. The use of non-personal sources did not allow for humanizing of the victims in the stories. The use of Nancy and Daniel Benoit’s names declined in coverage overtime. This study concluded that domestic violence was not a priority in the coverage of the crime.

This also supports the Bullock and Cubert (2002) research on domestic violence and the “patriarchal culture” that comes with domestic violence coverage that can be translated to professional sports and athletes. For example, journalists chose to detail the gruesome crime steadily while Nancy and Daniel Benoit’s name declined in the reporting of the stories. In the study by Campbell et al. (2003), the researchers stated that a history of domestic violence increases the likelihood that a murder could result. Even though domestic abuse was documented in the Benoit household, the possibility of domestic violence playing a role in the crime remained absent from news coverage. Parallels can be drawn from this study and the Messner and Solomon (1993) study that concluded the media frames of athletes as “jocks-on-drugs” is a norm

in the media and domestic violence is overshadowed by these preexisting frames. Entman (2007) defined content bias as a process when journalists favor one side over another and as a result they do not publish an equal report. This study shows that journalists employed content bias in the reporting of the Chris Benoit double-murder suicide by failing to report on domestic violence as much as they did on the subject of PEDs.

Overall, this study found that PEDs were framed as the central probable cause for the crime, and domestic violence was mostly ignored in coverage even though a history of abuse was documented.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The scope of this study was limited, as it involved only a portion of the massive media attention to the Benoit saga. Further studies may want to include more newspapers in an attempt to deepen the findings related to Benoit and/or expand the frames and findings related to the WWE and professional wrestling. Additionally, considering the broadcast and internet society that we live in today, the study is limited in that it only looks at print media reporting. Future research should include broadcast reporting from major news agencies – NBC, CNN, ABC, and FOX, for example. Studies examining internet blogs, social media sources and wrestling websites can also help future research in understanding frames used to define the professional wrestling industry. Wrestling has a very large presence on the internet and researching digital media can be beneficial. These inclusions could further solidify or diversify the findings if researchers were to see how print media frames the story compared to how broadcast and social media frame the story.

Future research should also consider examining professional sports and news media, and its view of women and domestic violence further. Understanding the culture of reporting on

domestic violence within sports and violence towards women among athletes can assist researchers in gaining an inclusive understanding of why these frames are generally ignored by professional sports and the media.

Initially, Vince McMahon and the WWE failed at their immediate response strategy attempt based on the Walton and Williams (2011) study. The company at first was unsuccessful at *bolstering* in its attempts to distance itself from Benoit (Walton & Williams, 2011). However, based on this research, future studies can analyze the WWE's long-term response strategies and its overall effectiveness. In analyzing data for this study, the WWE and Vince McMahon were rarely mentioned over the course of the year following the Benoit crime.

The issues of concussions have become a serious topic within professional sports organizations. Research should explore how media frames might be shaping the way this important issue, one with serious consequences for young athletes and athletes across all sports, is filtered to the public. As professional sports organizations continue to debate over the topic of concussions and its long-term effects, it would be beneficial to analyze media coverage of concussions and athletes.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusions**

Professional wrestling, an industry that is rarely covered in newspapers and news programming, became a focal point for the news media when Chris Benoit, a veteran WWE superstar, murdered his wife Nancy and son Daniel, before taking his own life. This study concludes that PEDs played a central role in media coverage of the Chris Benoit double-murder suicide and, consequently, were central to the framing of professional wrestling, but not of the WWE specifically. Most importantly, the content analysis used in this study concludes that journalists chose to frame PEDs as a central component in the crime. When Chris Benoit's brain

was studied by the Sports Legacy Institute it was determined by neurologists that Benoit suffered from CTE due to years of severe trauma to the head. Journalists continued to use the PED frame over the potential effects of concussions on professional athletes. As PEDs took center stage, journalists also mostly ignored the documented evidence of domestic violence between Benoit and his wife, which was prevalent in their marriage. As a result, the role of domestic violence was downplayed by the media and thus lost in news coverage. This was a missed opportunity; such coverage could initiate a larger focus of abuse against women by male athletes.

## Appendix A: Codebook

### Media Framing of the Double-Murder Suicide of World Wrestling Entertainment Star Chris Benoit

#### CODE BOOK:

#### 1. Story # \_\_\_\_\_

This coding category is designed for assigning each story a unique number.

#### 2. In what time frame was the article written?

Time from the incident (June 25, 2007) when article was in print.

1 = WITHIN 1 WEEK OF INCIDENT

2 = WITHIN 1 MONTH (> 1 wk < 1 month)

3 = (> 1 month < 3 months)

4 = (> 3 months < 6 months)

5 = (> 6 months)

#### 3. Newspaper

The publication in which the newspaper was published.

1 = New York Times

4 = Miami Herald

2 = AP (Associated Press)

5 = The Sun-Sentinel

3 = The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

#### 4. Story length

The length of the article published. The length of a story is coded by the word count. A story that contains less than 300 words is considered “brief”. A story that contains more than 600 words is considered “long”. A story that contains “300-600” is considered “mid-length”. If a word count is not listed, a full page article is estimated at 360 words, code appropriately.

1 = brief

2 = mid-length

3 = long

## 5. Type of article.

The category is designed for examining the basic content of the article. In what section of the newspaper is the article printed. A section listed as a geographic location is considered News.

1 = News      2 = Opinion (Op-Ed)      3 = Feature      4 = Sports      5 = Other / N/A

## 6. Is World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) mentioned in the article?

1 = Yes      2 = No

## 7. Is Vince McMahon mentioned in the article?

1 = Yes      2 = No

## 8. Is Nancy Benoit's name referenced in the article?

1 = Yes      2 = No

## 9. Is Daniel Benoit's name referenced in the article?

1 = Yes      2 = No

## 10. Is the term "domestic violence" used in the article?

1 = Yes      2 = No

## 11. Is the term "roid rage" used in the article?

1 = Yes      2 = No

## 12. Are steroids, human growth hormones, or performance enhancing drugs mentioned in the article?

1 = Yes      2 = No

**13. Who is directly quoted in the article?** If more than one, please use questions 13 – 17 as needed. Once question is coded appropriately please skip to question 18.

1 = Family

6 = Wrestlers

2 = WWE Official

7 = Police Reports

3 = Law Enforcement

8 = Medical Reports

4 = Domestic Violence Expert

9 = Attorney

5 = Medical Expert

10 = Other

**14. Who is directly quoted in the article?**

1 = Family

6 = Wrestlers

2 = WWE Official

7 = Police Reports

3 = Law Enforcement

8 = Medical Reports

4 = Domestic Violence Expert

9 = Attorney

5 = Medical Expert

10 = Other

**15. Who is directly quoted in the article?**

1 = Family

6 = Wrestlers

2 = WWE Official

7 = Police Reports

3 = Law Enforcement

8 = Medical Reports

4 = Domestic Violence Expert

9 = Attorney

5 = Medical Expert

10 = Other

**16. Who is directly quoted in the article?**

1 = Family

6 = Wrestlers

2 = WWE Official

7 = Police Reports

3 = Law Enforcement

8 = Medical Reports

4 = Domestic Violence Expert

9 = Attorney

5 = Medical Expert

10 = Other

**17. Who is directly quoted in the article?**

1 = Family

6 = Wrestlers

2 = WWE Official

7 = Police Reports

3 = Law Enforcement

8 = Medical Reports

4 = Domestic Violence Expert

9 = Attorney

5 = Medical Expert

10 = Other



18. Was the crime detailed in the article? (ex. Was the weight machine or bibles mentioned?)

1 = Yes            2 = No

19. Was a history of domestic violence referenced in article? (ex. restraining order)

1 = Yes            2 = No

20. Is any medical information mentioned referring to Chris Benoit, including name of his doctor, past treatments, past diagnosis?

1 = Yes            2 = No

21. Is steroid or PED use linked to professional wrestling?

1 = Yes            2 = No

22. Is “depression” mentioned in the article?

1 = Yes            2 = No

23. Are “concussions” mentioned in the article?

1 = Yes            2 = No

24. Is “alcohol” mentioned in the article?

1 = Yes            2 = No

25. Was the assertion by the WWE that Chris Benoit passed a recent drug test mentioned in the article?

1 = Yes            2 = No

26. Is it implied that the WWE is linked to the Benoit tragedy?

1 = Yes            2 = No

27. Are “painkillers” or “muscle relaxers” referenced in the article?

1 = Yes            2 = No

## Appendix B: Tables

Table 1

*Timeframe of the crime compared to the frequency of articles within that timeframe*

<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Article Frequency (N)</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>Within 1 Week</b>	38	28.6
<b>Within 1 month (&gt;1 week &lt;1 month)</b>	30	22.6
<b>&gt;1 month &lt;3 months</b>	32	24.1
<b>&gt;3 months &lt;6 months</b>	16	12.0
<b>&gt;6 months</b>	17	12.8
<b>Total</b>	133	100.0

Table 2

*Frequency of those who were quoted in the reporting of the Benoit murder-suicide*

<b>Quoted</b>	<b>Article Frequency (N)</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>WWE Officials</b>	32	24
<b>Law Enforcement</b>	34	26
<b>Medical Experts</b>	26	20
<b>Wrestlers</b>	8	6
<b>Attorneys</b>	57	43
<b>Family</b>	17	12.8
<b>Medical Reports</b>	5	3.8
<b>Police Reports</b>	1	0.8
<b>Other</b>	43	32

Table 3

*Newspaper source and mentions of medical information and 'roid rage'*

<b>Newspaper Source</b>	<b>Medical Information Mentioned (N)</b>	<b>Medical Information (%)</b>	<b>'Roid Rage Mentioned' (N)</b>	<b>'Roid Rage' (%)</b>
<b>The New York Times</b>	9	60	3	20
<b>The Atlanta Journal-Constitution</b>	24	52.2	4	8.7
<b>The Miami Herald</b>	7	24.1	7	24.1
<b>The Sun-Sentinel</b>	2	50	1	25
<b>Associated Press</b>	27	69.2	20	51.3

Table 4

*Frequency of mentions of concussions*

<b>Concussion Mentions</b>	<b>Article Frequency (N)</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
<b>Yes (mentions)</b>	19	14.3
<b>No (no mentions)</b>	114	85.7
<b>Totals</b>	133	100.0

### Appendix C: List of Sample Articles

- Ahmed, S. & Jefcoats, K. (2007, June 26). Pro wrestler, family found dead Apparent murder-suicide takes lives of Chris Benoit, wife, son at Fayetteville home. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, A1. Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).
- Allen, B. (2007, June 29). Gwinnett Opinions: Forgive me, but I will miss Chris Benoit. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, J8. Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).
- Barr, B. (2008, January 16). Regs would put wrestling in headlock. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, A15. Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).
- Basu, M. (2007, July 3). Coping with Fragile X Recent media mention has brought attention to a mental impairment of children, which some families deal with privately. The Scott family has chosen to deal with it openly. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, A1. Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).
- Benoit, family presumed dead. (2007, June 25). *The Miami Herald*, n.pag. Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).
- Bloomberg News. (2007, November 3). Two suspended. *The New York Times*, D4. Retrieved September 27, 2013 from ProQuest on-line database.
- Bluestein, G. (2007a, June 27). Wrestler and wife argued over care of retarded 7-year-old son in days before murder-suicide. *Associated Press News Service*, n.pag. Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).

- Bluestein, G. (2007b, June 27). Wrestler strangled wife, suffocated son, hanged himself in weight room; police offer no motive. *Associated Press News Service, n.pag.* Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).
- Bluestein, G. (2007c, June 27). Wrestler who strangled wife, smothered son said he'd be late to event because family was ill. *Associated Press News Service, n.pag.* Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).
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- Bronis, J. (2007a, June 29). Anonymous Wikipedia user admits altering Benoit profile, says edits were based on rumors. *Associated Press News Service, n.pag.* Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).
- Bronis, J. (2007b, July 3). Prosecutor disputes WWE's assertion that Benoit's son had 'Fragile X' retardation. *Associated Press News Service, n.pag.* Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).

- Christoffersen, J. (2007, August 31). WWE suspends 10 wrestlers for violating policy on steroids and other drugs. *Associated Press News Service, n.pag.* Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).
- Committee asks WWE for drug policy information following wrestler's death. (2007, July 27). *Associated Press News Service, n.pag.* Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).
- Dahlberg, T. (2007, September 12). Fake can be very real when taking a chair to the head. *Associated Press News Service, n.pag.* Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).
- Duffy, K. (2007, July 3). Ties to Benoit case: Feds: Indicated doctor prescribed 'drugs like candy.' *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, C1.* Retrieved October 30, 2013 from NewsBank on-line database (Access World News).
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