

Shelly Kiser: How did a decision by a youth football organization lead to claims that they were weakening American society and emasculating American males? We'll find out today on this episode of the Thought Provoking podcast. We'll also hear about the far-reaching impacts of how media frames issues and examine how athletes' activism on mental health and social justice topics is framed by the media. And we'll look at the media portrayal of LeBron James' activism and its implication for athletes who want to promote change. This is Shelly Kiser. And joining me today to talk about his research is Dr. David Casillo, Assistant Professor of Communication here at Kennesaw State University.

Welcome, David. We're glad to have you here with us today.

David Casillo: Of course, I'm really excited to be here.

Shelly Kiser: You study something called media, framing and sports. What exactly is media framing? And why is that so important?

David Casillo: Media framing is essentially what you're seeing in a news story. No matter the format, whether it's a digital, print story, broadcast story, it's impossible that that story is just going to be completely without any sort of influence from the journalists, whether that be some opinion or some sort of values the journalists might have. And that is regardless of whether there's intent or if there's not intent. It's just naturally going to happen. So, you might see that by the quotes that are chosen, or the words that are chosen, how the sentences are structured, what's included, what's not included from the topic. That's going to frame the perspective. In a more common sense, you might hear people say, "This has more of a liberal slant or a conservative slant." But that can happen in stories that aren't even related to politics, that there might be some frame to it.

Shelly Kiser: That's interesting. One aspect of your research was to look at the media framing of concussions in sports. I know there have been a lot of discussions in the media about the issue of risk of long-term damage from concussions. And that's especially true in football. So, what are doctors finding as far as the damage that concussions can do?

David Casillo: They're finding that the long-term effects are really as bad, if not worse than you could have imagined. Now, this isn't a situation where every single player who plays football is going to walk away with some sort of long-term effect. Some walk away and are completely fine, even if they've had ten concussions. And some have one concussion, and it really disrupts the rest of their life. What they have found, though, is there are effects -- depression, suicide, Alzheimer's, also CTE, which is something that they're finding in a lot of former players brains after they're deceased. If you've been following the news in football, the lifespan of the football player is dramatically less than the common American citizen. So, it can really impact how long you live as well as your quality of life while you're still alive. Wow, that's some serious stuff there. In your research, you say that the media connects football with American identity and culture, and also a couple of concepts you call hegemonic masculinity and the pain principle. I know an example you gave in your paper was Rush Limbaugh. He suggested

that attempts to make football safer were proof that American culture was becoming "chickified." So, what is hegemonic masculinity and the related pain principle and how are they linked with football?

Hegemonic masculinity is this idea that within our society there's an idealized version of what it means to be a man. And for years and years, that was this idea of being tough, showing no emotion, being able to sacrifice your body in whatever way you needed to for your profession. And part of hegemonic masculinity is that that view of a male dominated all other views of a male. So, a male that is more emotional or is someone who isn't as physically strong is thought to be weaker. It also impacts femininity in society, as well.

The pain principle is essentially that, within sports, you are sacrificing your body. It's that idea of no pain, no gain. You're willing to do whatever it takes to win. You don't care if you walk away from the field all bloody and battered. If you do that, it's really a symbol that you are doing everything it takes to win, which was for years and years idealized within sports, specifically with football, which is the most visible of all sports. Only recently have we seen more attention paid to the health and safety of the players, and players aren't viewed as chickens or viewed as less of a man if they are taking care of their health and safety. Now, you're seeing that shift, both with the employer mindset as well as the media coverage surrounding it.

Shelly Kiser: Okay, so we're seeing a little bit of change here. When it comes to media and concussions, you talk about a couple of competing things: doing what's best for health, based on the things we know about the health effects of concussions, versus that pain principle/hegemonic masculinity mentality. When you were studying all this, there was a football player who retired because of the risk of concussions that you studied. Who was this football player, and why is his case especially noteworthy?

David Casillo: The player was Chris Borland, and he retired from the San Francisco 49ers after one season. He was one of the best defensive players in his rookie class. It looked like he had a long prosperous career ahead of himself. He had never sustained a concussion, but basically decided, after one year, that the risk of playing football was not worth it, and he was going to walk away from the sport. That's what made it notable -- that he wasn't someone that had been injured for years and was walking away to preserve what health he had left. It was a pre-emptive move. At the time, it was the first of its kind. You've seen some players do the same with the college and pro level now. And it really was received well, in the media. There was a lot of praise for him for taking care of himself, taking care of his health and safety. That's important because a lot of the information we get about health issues comes from the media, because a lot of people aren't reading original medical studies. The information that they give, it sets an example for other people. So, if someone else is really concerned that they don't want to play football any longer because they're worried it might impact their health, then they feel all this positive coverage and reaction to what Borland did. It can lead them to make a similar decision, if that's what they want to do.

Shelly Kiser: Okay, I see that it was really noteworthy. Your research looked at online articles and print articles from the sports media outlets in the weeks following when Chris Borland announced that he would retire. Two of the top themes or frames in the media that you mentioned are the health consequences of concussions and also a real positive portrayal of Borland. So, you think the digital and print media mainly fell on the side of covering the health side of concussions?

David Casillo: Yeah, it was definitely more health focused, whether it's being supportive of Borland or just explaining what the risks of playing football are. That's a big, as I said earlier, for people who don't get their health information elsewhere. Just learning that throughout the coverage is important. So, yes, there was a great focus on health. And I would imagine, now -- that was about a half decade ago -- now, when that happens, if a player was to do something similar today, we might see even a greater focus on health. And it might just be treated as commonplace because it has become so in some respect. Players are retiring much earlier, because they want to take care of their long-term health like Borland did.

Shelly Kiser: So, a really big change we're seeing here?

David Casillo: Oh, for sure.

Shelly Kiser: You also studied an influential decision by a youth sports organization that had to do with this theme.

David Casillo: Pop Warner decided that they were going to eliminate kickoffs at certain age levels, because kickoffs and football have been shown to be the most dangerous play, with the players running at each other at full speed. And so, they decided they wanted to eliminate kickoffs. And the interesting aspect there was I looked at the social media reaction to that decision. And it was largely negative. It was largely people saying that they thought that this was devaluing what it means to be an American male in our society. They took it to the level that basically said this is the first step toward ruining football professionally. You saw that disconnect. If we talk about the Borland study, it was a lot of attention was positive focused on health and supportive of Borland. But, that's the media coverage. The social media reaction is largely, "This is not something that we agree with. This is something that's hurting our society, hurting the sport, hurting these players." We got a lot of people who argued that they wouldn't get the experience of how to protect themselves against kickoffs, and then they wouldn't be able to do that later in their career. It is really a clash between the media reaction being really health focused and the social media reaction really looking at that idealized version of the male we talked about earlier.

Shelly Kiser: Speaking of social media, one social media user that I saw you quoted in your research paper said, "Sissy generation, what are we going to do when China or Russia invade us, just lay down? So, you say people even saw a connection between discontinuing kickoffs in youth sports with the decline of America?"

David Casillo: Yeah, a handful of people took that next step. It wasn't just about football; it was about this whole idea that our standing as a country was declining in some way because of Pop Warner eliminating kickoffs. So quite a leap to make. But it wasn't just one person who made that leap. There were several people who felt that was the case. Really a big difference between the social media take and traditional media.

Shelly Kiser: You noted that some of this framing, or if there was a lack of framing, could be because of the sports media complex. What is the sports media complex? And how does that relate to framing?

David Casillo: The sports media complex is this idea that it's a mutually beneficial relationship for sports to be successful within this country, between the sport and the media companies. Because the more people to watch a sport, the higher the ratings. The higher the ratings, the higher the advertising. So, in these places like ESPN, Fox Sports, they're in it together. There is this idea that maybe there aren't as many investigative or negative stories about a league like the NFL. Maybe there aren't as many investigative stories or anything negative coming from these outlets about the NFL or other sports because they don't want to hurt their bottom line. That can really impact, potentially, how things are covered. Now, at the end of the day, does it? It's possible. I think some of the choices that media networks make on what they decide to air, or what they decide to include, or what they assign, can be influenced by these things. But you would hope that most journalists are just trying to do their job and be ethical journalists, no matter what outlet they work at.

Shelly Kiser: Yeah. As a journalism major, I hope that's true, for sure. This incident that you talked about really led to some broad discussions about football and its impact on players and its impact on the community. So does your research show that that no pain, no gain ideology that maybe we associated with football has been overturned somewhat?

David Casillo: I really think that it is not completely gone. But it is eroded to a significant level at this point. I think now anyone who plays football, anyone who decides to play football, always is aware of the health concerns now. From there, it's really the players decision if they want to play. There are some great benefits to football, especially, if you're professional, the financial benefits. In some of these cases, these athletes are never going to have a chance to make this kind of money unless they play football. But now there's always that health concern as well. I think that's important for professional athletes to weigh those. To me, it's really important at the collegiate and the scholastic level, like your high school players as well, to be fully informed and to know that there are negatives and there are drawbacks to sacrificing your body. Because it's those players who aren't getting paid. And they can have the effects without seeing much benefit.

Shelly Kiser: Being informed is very important.

This is Shelly Kiser. I'm the host of the Thought Provoking podcast and also communications manager for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia, just outside

Atlanta, Kennesaw State is the third largest university in the state and a Carnegie-designated R2 doctoral research institution, placing it among an elite group of only 6% of U.S. colleges and universities with either an R1 or R2 status. It's also one of the 50 largest public institutions in the country. The College of Humanities and Social Sciences is the largest college at KSU. With over 400 faculty members, and over 7000 students, it houses 11 departments and schools with more than 80 programs of study. Our show features the amazing researchers in our college, and they're amazing and thought-provoking research.

In another line of your research, you studied how the media handled two NBA players that talked about their mental health issues, something that probably happened very little in the NBA in the past, because there's such a stigma related to mental health problems. Who were these two NBA players? And what was their situation?

David Casillo: Sure. The first of those players was Royce White. He was a rookie at Iowa State. In 2012 he was drafted by the Houston Rockets. He was about to start his career. As you alluded to earlier, there wasn't a lot of mental health discussion, especially in 2012. In the NBA it wasn't talked about a lot not just in the NBA, but in all sports. He came out of Iowa State with issues with anxiety. He had a fear of flying. He wanted to, from the get-go, establish a relationship with the Rockets that would work to meet his mental health needs. He went through that process for a while. Ultimately, they could never come to any sort of an agreement. He never played for the Rockets. He wound up only playing three games in his NBA career. It served as a roadblock for him to ever get his career started. Flash forward to 2018, you had a player, DeMar DeRozan, an established all-star at the time with the Toronto Raptors. And he, one night, took to social media and said that he had been suffering from depression, and overwhelmingly had support from other players in the NBA. In the weeks, months, years, others have followed suit, using him as an inspiration, citing him as the reason that they have been public about their mental health. The NBA itself has created mental health initiatives involving DeRozan. So, it was a much more supportive environment when he decided to talk about his mental health.

Shelly Kiser: That's very interesting. Your study showed that the media coverage of Royce White was more negative than the coverage of DeMar DeRozan. How so?

David Casillo: With White, there was blame for him. Basically, he was part of the reason it wasn't working. Some of the frames were about basically that he was being difficult. He was being too vocal about his issue. So it wasn't that the media coverage was, "The Rockets, the NBA, they should take care of his mental health. There was some blame assigned to White. You didn't see any of that with DeRozan. And I don't remember a single article that said he did something. There might be a couple reasons why. It's hard to speculate. But one is that White was a rookie who never played a game. A lot of people also felt like he was asking for a lot. He didn't really have that credit. He didn't have those credentials, that credibility beforehand. DeRozan was a well-established player. At the time, probably one of the top 25 best players in the league. And he was coming from a much different position. Also, if you

look at how mental health was treated in this country in 2012 versus 2018, it's made a lot of progress. There's been a lot more support. You've had a lot of people in many different areas of society, in notable positions, talk about their mental health. It's a conversation that is much further along in 2018, than it was in 2012.

Shelly Kiser: So big change from how mental health was covered in the past. Do you think that the difference in coverage for these two players also had to do with the roles they took on -- one as advocate and one as just an informational approach?

David Casillo: Yeah. I think in terms of White's case, he wanted a lot. And I think that in many respects he was justified in wanting all the change that he needed for his situation and needed for how mental health is treated in the NBA. When you have someone asking for a lot and trying to be a disrupter, it can be harder for people to support and get behind, especially since, as I said earlier, he had never played a game. So, I think people weren't thrilled that he was trying to cause so much change within the league without having that credibility behind them. The other player, DeRozan, didn't really ruffle a lot of feathers. He just said, "I've been suffering from depression." He was willing to leave it at that. It was really after that there was such an outpouring of support and emotion from other media sources. They started asking about it. He did interviews on it, but he wasn't really trying to cause any sort of disruption, positive or negative within the league. So, I think that people are a lot more comfortable with what DeRozan did. I'm not saying one's right, one's wrong. I don't think one is right, and one is wrong. But I just think that when you're asking for very little, people are comfortable with it. And when you're asking for a lot, people become less comfortable. And that's when you see maybe some negative attention around him.

Shelly Kiser: Very interesting. So, you're really seeing two very different models of advocates shown and really two different frames that the media gave them - one somewhat negatively and one positively. What are the implications of that kind of framing by the media?

David Casillo: Not just with mental health, but in any forms of activism, advocacy, we're definitely supportive of people, especially in this era, voicing their opinions on health issues, social justice issues in society. But I think that some people are only comfortable with people going so far. You saw with, for example, just recently, when the NBA made a lot of strides in social justice. They've been supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. When they came back after the hiatus to the pandemic, they all wore jerseys with social justice messages on them. But the players weren't allowed to pick those jerseys. What it said on the jerseys, the NBA picked what the slogans were, and then they had to decide which one they wanted to wear. So, they're willing to be supportive, be activists to a degree, but when players start pushing the envelope, that can make people uncomfortable, leagues uncomfortable, sponsors leagues uncomfortable. There is a chain reaction.

Shelly Kiser: Okay, so a lot of pressures, different pressures when it comes to advocacy.

The College of Humanities and Social Sciences at KSU is hosting a series of events on diversity this year. As part of that series, we will be talking next month to Dr. Tracy Stewart, Professor of Psychological Science, about her research on unconscious bias in the workplace. We'll learn how researchers like Dr. Stewart test what biases we may have, and how they go about capturing biases we don't even know we have? Can we actually rewire our brain to be less biased? We'll find out. And we'll examine whether training or workplace policies can completely eliminate bias in the workplace, or can some policies actually make it worse? Finally, Dr. Stewart will tell us what we can do personally to help reduce bias at work.

A third line of your research is based on social justice activism by athletes. You mentioned that during the Civil Rights Movement, black athletes were engaged in activism. But by the 80s, you say that most athletes really weren't involved in political discussions, which really seems surprising to us today, since athletes have certainly been some of the most visible supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement. You studied LeBron James, in particular. And he also didn't get involved in these discussions early on. So why did these changes occur in whether athletes got involved in these political issues from the 1960s and 70s through today?

David Casillo: I think there are a lot of reasons. When you got into the 80s, 90s, early 2000s, it was a time of financial change for the league. Salaries were rising, TV contracts were rising, and there was a lot of money to be had. I think in some respects, the players didn't want to risk that huge financial benefit to stand up for what they believed in. You had the most notable player in that era in all sports with Michael Jordan, famously not wanting to get involved in any political issues. And I think that for many players, especially in the NBA, he was the role model. He set the bar. He set the example. And that was his choice. He just didn't want to be involved. And not saying that was right or wrong. But that's the route that he wanted to go. As we went towards the late 2000s to the early 2010s, you saw that begin to change. I think a big reason for that was the advent of social media. I think because of that it was never easier to be an activist. If you believed something, you believe strongly in something, you could post to your social media account and get that message out there. You didn't have to go to rallies, you didn't have to protest in the streets, you didn't have to protest on the court or on the field. You could show you support what you believe in. I think a lot of players have done that since. And social media has been a way to gather community support behind social justice and other issues. That's really amplified the protests and the amount of people willing to be activists in athletics today.

Shelly Kiser: I can imagine that James and other athletes are really uniquely positioned to be powerful advocates on behalf of movements, because of the fans they have via social media. But your research showed that they also face challenges to becoming advocates, correct?

David Casillo: Well, I think that it's very difficult, first of all, to get involved in every single issue. You have this idea that you're an

activist, and if you're labeled an activist by someone, then you feel pressured to get involved with everything, and I think that you've seen, especially the more notable athletes, the bigger stars, they've been a little more measured, getting information, not just speaking out on certain issues. Because just as things like social media are positive, they can also lead to a lot of backlash. And I think that with these athletes, they do consider their brand, their sponsors, all that sort of stuff. And that's still a consideration like it was 20 or 30 years ago. So that's one aspect. I also think that it can be difficult from what we saw early in the 2010s - now maybe this has gone away at this point - but the way that Colin Kaepernick was responded to, how he was framed in the media first, how he was kind of vilified by some people within the NFL. That caused some people to think twice, to know that their career might be in jeopardy. Now, I don't think that would happen. But that was less than ten years ago, and I do think that probably impacted a lot of athletes' opinions on how far they really wanted to go with their activism.

Shelly Kiser: Interesting. And you mentioned brand. In your research paper, you talk about LeBron James as a powerhouse brand. So does a personal or team brand really influence an athlete's choice about whether he's going to speak out on an issue?

David Casillo: Yeah, it does. When we talk about LeBron James, you're right. He is the brand in itself, and he's really trying to extend his career well beyond the NBA, when he's all said and done. He's involved in Hollywood. He's a producer, he's an actor. He's involved in a lot of different business ventures. I always feel like with LeBron, everything is first things first, he doesn't want to jeopardize his brand. Now part of his brand is being an activist. He speaks on social justice issues. But the specific case that we looked into with our research was when a boy was shot and killed by a police officer in Cleveland. He was playing for Cleveland at the time, and he chose to not get involved in that. And that might have been due to how that might have impacted his brand. He really, at the time, identified with the city of Cleveland, being born and raised there. And if he was going to kind of go head to head with the police officers, the police department in that area, it might have led to conflict and strife with how people perceived him. So that's one reason LeBron has also at times chosen to be not silent but chosen not to speak too heavily on issues like when there were the protests in Hong Kong at the beginning of the season. The NBA was kind of thrown into the center of those, and he chose to not get involved. I think, as I said earlier, a lot of decisions are related to his brand. He really wants to, in some respects, play it down the middle so that everyone really wants to consume whatever it is he does beyond his NBA career. And in another respect, he is very measured in the sense that he wants to get as much information as possible.

Shelly Kiser: Being from Ohio. I know that people there love LeBron James. And he's really big there.

David Casillo: Exactly. And that's part of his identity. So, when he didn't get involved in a certain situation, you wonder if he knew that

was part of who he was. Especially at that point in his career, it was all about being born and raised in Akron, Ohio.

Shelly Kiser: I know that when this shooting occurred, with Tamir Rice, the 12-year-old boy from Cleveland, people really expected a reaction from him, but he didn't give one. That second theme that you mentioned, in your paper, you call "established voice, higher expectations." So, is that what this is - that people expected him to say something about these causes because he had said things in the past?

David Casillo: Yeah, it's what I was talking about earlier that once you get involved in some social justice issues or some form of activism, people look to you -- you become a leader in society, in the community, in the league. So anytime there's anything that happens you're asked. Now, if there's a shooting or a protest happening, the next day at his press conference, LeBron is usually asked about it. And that's all about being an established voice. And that's having higher expectations. It's not just that he's being asked about it, people expect him to respond in a certain way. Sometimes he does that. I would say a vast majority of times, he's very vocal. And sometimes he doesn't, and he has his reasons to not do that.

Shelly Kiser: So, having this established voice and people having these higher expectations of him speaking out on this, is that what triggered the hashtag #NoJusticeNoLeBron?

David Casillo: Yeah, I think it did. At the time, he had been very vocal on a couple things, like the killing of Eric Garner, who was killed by a New York City police officer, if I remember correctly. He had been vocal about wearing an I can't breathe shirt during warmups one day, along with a couple other players in the league. So, when this happened, basically right in his backyard, it was sort of expected. The parents of Tamir Rice expected it. There were community members that said, basically, LeBron is going to be on our side; he's going to amplify the issue. And when that didn't happen, people did get restless. They got a little upset with his reaction. In some ways he did address it. He didn't go into the level that you're seeing in recent years. (He's been very vocal about the Brianna Taylor shooting.) But he addressed it. He also said at the time that he didn't want this to disrupt his city. He wanted to put the focus on other things. They were in the middle of a playoff run at the time. So, there were a lot of other things going on. And this was very early into the idea of the athlete activist, the kind of rebirth of the athlete activist. It's not what you saw today. This is about five, six years ago, when LeBron was still one of just a handful of players speaking out. There wasn't this sort of expectation of a certain level of activism, like you might see in 2020.

Shelly Kiser: Okay, so this was just in the beginning phase of athletes feeling comfortable with speaking out about issues. What does this all tell us about athletes' activism in the media? What's the key takeaway for us?

David Casillo: There are a couple things. First of all, it is more expected now. You have more athletes participate, labeling themselves as

an activist. That is kind of twofold. One of them aspect is, as I said earlier, that it's never been easier to be an activist. You can take to social media, get your opinions, get your voice out there. And that can be your level of activism. So that's one aspect. On the other side, you have a lot of issues in society that are getting more positive framing, more support. Whether it be social justice, health issues, whatever it might be, you have a lot of movements within our American society. It's more accepted than it was. There's less likelihood, if not no likelihood at all at this point, that a player will be treated like Colin Kaepernick. So, athletes feel safer to express their activism today. And the media has really responded in their coverage, not just positive framing. You actually see extensive coverage of these issues on ESPN, Fox Sports, local sports media. Whether it's LeBron James in LA or nationally, or whether it's, if we're talking about the Atlanta area, Trey Young or Matt Ryan talking about certain social justice issues, that's going to be front page news. That's going to get a lot of people to read those stories. Now, it's a bit more commonplace that if something happens nationally or locally, athletes are asked about it. And, as you said earlier, they're established voices at this point.

Shelly Kiser: Sounds like it's a really good time for athletes who choose to be activists on issues. In your paper on mental illness and the NBA players, you state that "The similarities between shifts in media coverage and organizational attitudes regarding mental health are likely no accident." Is that why you study media framing? Does it relate to how the media can really impact and influence the public and organizations?

David Casillo: Yeah. When I started doing my research, I really wanted to focus on sports, because I'd worked as a sports reporter, and it was something that I felt passionate about. But I wanted to look at health issues within sports. You can see, aside from the activism, the first two were really health focused. And the importance there to me is what I said earlier: we learn a lot about health issues through the media. So, it's very, very important to understand how the media is covering these health issues. If you think back to a non-sports related thing -- how smoking was covered in the media decades ago or how drinking is covered in the media. Now, with sports, the importance of concussions. Concussions are something that is not really an issue of concern in anything really but sports. We're getting a lot of our information from people who cover football for a living. So, it's important that that information is health focused, it's important that it is correct information that's being disseminated to the public. And the same with mental health. Now, you're going to see that in more areas, but sports media is a giant within the media industry. A lot of people watch sports, a lot of people consume sports. That's the reason that every year the highest rated television programs are sporting events. So, how those issues are being communicated within the media, that's going to reach a lot of people. And it's going to influence how they feel about things like mental health, how they feel about physical health, like concussions, and then ultimately influence how they feel about social justice issues as well.

Shelly Kiser: Important stuff, for sure. This has been a fascinating look at media, framing and sports and health and mental health and activism. Thanks so much for being with us here today, David.

David Casillo: Thank you for having me. I'm always a big fan of listening to the podcast. I look forward to hearing my own interview and seeing all the interviews to come during the series.

Shelly Kiser: Thanks so much.

Thought Provoking is a production of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia, just outside Atlanta. You can follow our college on Facebook or Instagram at ksuchss or visit our website at chss.kennesaw.edu This is Shelly Kiser, and I'll be back next month with another episode. Talk to you then.