

Rowan University

Rowan Digital Works

Theses and Dissertations

5-13-2008

The image of professional wrestling: a case study of the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide

Neil Borenstein
Rowan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd>



Part of the [Public Relations and Advertising Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Borenstein, Neil, "The image of professional wrestling: a case study of the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide" (2008). *Theses and Dissertations*. 687.
<https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd/687>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Rowan Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Rowan Digital Works. For more information, please contact graduateresearch@rowan.edu.

THE IMAGE OF PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING:
A CASE STUDY OF THE CHRIS BENOIT DOUBLE MURDER-SUICIDE

by
Neil Borenstein

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Masters of Arts Degree of The Graduate School of
Rowan University
May 13, 2008

Approved by _____

Date approved May 13, 2008

© 2008 Neil Borenstein

ABSTRACT

Neil Borenstein

THE IMAGE OF PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING:
A CASE STUDY OF THE CHRIS BENOIT DOUBLE MURDER-SUICIDE
2008

Adviser: Dr. Suzanne Sparks FitzGerald
Public Relations Graduate Program

This study investigates the media's role in influencing public perception of the professional wrestling industry following the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide. The researcher sought to understand the manner in which newspapers portrayed the professional wrestling industry and whether media coverage in general played a role in forming the public's opinion of the industry.

Through a content analysis of articles and headlines in *The New York Times* and *The Miami Herald*, the researcher evaluated the tone of the media coverage of the professional wrestling industry. Intercept studies conducted at two southern New Jersey sports bars revealed where people received their information about the Benoit incident, whether they found the media accounts believable and how the reports made them feel about the professional wrestling industry.

It was found that the media covered professional wrestling in a mostly neutral manner following the Benoit incident. Surveyed respondents also had a neutral attitude toward the professional wrestling industry and their opinions were not changed by media coverage.

MINI-ABSTRACT

Neil Borenstein

THE IMAGE OF PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING: A CASE STUDY OF THE CHRIS BENOIT DOUBLE MURDER-SUICIDE 2008

Adviser: Dr. Suzanne Sparks FitzGerald
Public Relations Graduate Program

This study investigates the media's role in influencing public perception of the professional wrestling industry following the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide.

A content analysis was conducted to determine the tone of media coverage regarding professional wrestling. Intercept studies determined public opinion of the industry and whether the media played a role in forming that opinion.

Research revealed that the media covered professional wrestling in a neutral manner. The public had a neutral attitude toward the industry, as well, though perception was independent of media coverage.

Acknowledgments

Working through a master's program is a difficult, yet rewarding, experience that can only be accomplished with the guidance and support of numerous people.

I would like to thank Dr. Suzanne Sparks FitzGerald. Her assistance and direction through every step of writing this thesis paper and the entire graduate program made it all that more manageable and meaningful.

I would also like to thank my parents, Howard and Phyllis Borenstein, for encouraging all of my educational pursuits.

Finally, I would like to extend my appreciation to all my professors, friends and co-workers. Whether they know it or not, each of them played some role in my completion of this master's program.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgments.....	ii
Tables of Figures.....	v
Chapter One	
Importance of the Problem	1
Problem Statement.....	5
Purpose	6
Procedure	8
Delimitations	9
Summary.....	10
Terminology	11
Chapter Two	
The History of Professional Wrestling in America	12
Sociological Perspectives	
Violence	16
Gender Roles.....	17
Professional Wrestling as Sport.....	19
Sports Public Relations.....	20
Media Relations	22
Professional Wrestling and the Media.....	23
Television vs. Newspapers	24
Summary.....	25
Chapter Three	
Study Design.....	27
Data Collection.....	28
Data Methods.....	29
Data Analysis.....	30

Chapter Four	
Results	32
General Findings	41
Chapter Five	
Discussion.....	43
General Findings	45
Further Research.....	45
Conclusion.....	46
References.....	48
Appendix – Intercept Survey	51

TABLE OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1	28
Figure 2	34
Figure 3	34
Figure 4	35
Figure 5	36
Figure 6	37
Figure 7	39
Figure 8	39
Figure 9	40
Figure 10	42

Chapter One

Importance of the Problem

Like Rodney Dangerfield, professional wrestling receives little respect. Often decried as ignorant or juvenile, pro wrestling is frequently lumped with other forms of 'trash' culture, such as television soap operas and NASCAR. The situation for wrestling is, if anything, even worse than its fellow cultural bottom-feeders. Although NASCAR received a measure of support as a legitimate sport and soaps are viewed as an aspect of escapist entertainment, wrestling resides somewhere beyond the pale, (Beekman, 2006, p. 1).

Scott M. Beekman (2006), a visiting assistant professor of history at Ohio University, begins his book, "Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America," garnering some credibility upon an industry considered little more than a distant relative of "real" professional sport because of its choreographed matches and scripted storylines.

According to Michael Atkinson (2002):

While largely discounted as genuine sport by most, professional wrestling has evolved from a minor source of "entertainment" to a culturally powerful multimedia complex. Attracting audiences of fifty million viewers on a weekly basis, professional wrestling has become the number one rated "sports-entertainment" program on television. In doing so, professional wrestling broadcasts challenge long-standing cultural constructions of sport in North America, while hyperbolizing and unapologetically exploiting that which is highly entertaining about professional sports contests, (p. 47).

The industry became a lot more real, however, on June 25, 2007. The bodies of Chris Benoit, his wife, Nancy, and their son, Daniel, were discovered at their Fayetteville, Ga. residence at about 2:30 p.m. Authorities concluded that Benoit killed Nancy and Daniel over the course of the weekend, and then took his own life.

For an industry mostly shunned by the media and left absent from broadcasts and news pages, an incident of this magnitude drew a heightened interest from the press and

fans alike. In a collection of essays titled “Benoit: Wrestling with the Horror that Destroyed a Family and Crippled a Sport,” (2007), Steven Johnson notes:

The revelation that Chris Benoit murdered his wife, Nancy, and son Daniel before taking his own life at his Atlanta-area house in late June 2007 challenged the media’s view of wrestling like never before, (p. 97).

The previous view held by the media, according to Johnson, was to only cover it on special occasions, when something outrageous occurred or was set to occur, such as billionaire real estate tycoon Donald Trump’s involvement at WrestleMania 23. Otherwise, pages in print were void of professional wrestling coverage.

Benoit’s incident lit a spark. He was a well-respected, 21-year veteran of the ring, renowned by many as one of the most gifted technical wrestlers in the industry. Suddenly, as a result of what Benoit did, the appeal of the squared circle to the mainstream media increased.

Nowhere was the popularization of wrestling in the media more noticeable than on cable news programming. According to Johnson (2007), the ratings of cable news and talk show programming that devoted the most time to covering the Benoit incident – *Nancy Grace*, *On The Record*, *MSNBC Live*, and *Hannity and Colmes* – either remained on par with the programs’ averages, or went above them, (p. 104). The lead followed by most of these programs was that Benoit killed his wife and son as a result of ‘roid rage, stemming from popular perception about wrestling’s hulking personalities and the fact that steroids were found by authorities inside the Benoit residence. Such an assertion was premature, however, as the results of a toxicology report were not made available until several weeks following the incident.

World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), who employed Benoit at the time of the incident, considered media coverage sensationalistic. In a news release posted on the

WWE's corporate Web site (corporate.wwe.com) on June 26, 2007, the company addressed its concerns over speculative reporting by the media.

World Wrestling Entertainment is stunned and saddened by the details released by local authorities concerning the double homicide-suicide involving Chris Benoit, his wife, Nancy, and his son, Daniel. However, WWE is concerned with the sensationalistic reporting and speculation being undertaken by some members of the media following the press conference held by the Fayette County Sheriff's Department and the District Attorney, (n.p.).

Benoit's double murder-suicide was not the first time tragedy struck professional wrestling. It has, however, becoming a leading cause behind linking professional wrestling to problems such as substance abuse and dangerous performance. According to *USA Today*, at least 70 wrestlers have died at the age of 45 or younger since 1997 as a result of "ailments linked to steroids, illegal drugs and devastating injuries," (2007). The names of those wrestlers include Brian Pillman (heart disease), "The British Bulldog" Davey Boy Smith (heart attack), Scott "Bam Bam" Bigelow (heart attack), and Benoit's close friend Eddie Guerrero (heart failure). Many of the deaths were linked to previous or current drug use. The television media used Benoit's history to promote the idea that his killings were steroid-induced.

This study seeks to discover the foundation of newspaper coverage of the Benoit incident, and if media coverage in general impacted public opinion of the professional wrestling industry.

Newspapers are still a trusted news source in America despite the continued emergence of television and the Internet. According to John Eggerton (2005), a Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) telephone survey of 1,015 adults in the United States revealed that more than half (56 percent) of the sample trusted newspapers.

According to The American Society of Newsroom Editors (1999), the public perceives newspapers to have more credibility than television thanks to better explanations and details in news stories and a higher standard for accuracy than television. Based on this perception of higher credibility and an overall sense of trust in newspapers, the public is more endeared to accepting what newspapers state as fact. As a result, they play a key role in informing the public and help shape public opinion.

Through this study, the scope of newspaper coverage pertaining to the Benoit incident – whether it is positive, neutral, or negative nature – will be determined. Positive coverage is defined as that which distinctly places negative events such as the Benoit incident separate from the professional wrestling industry, or directly links positive events to it. For example, the fact that he was a wrestler had nothing to do with his actions. Neutral coverage is defined as that which neither separates nor connects negative events to professional wrestling. These reports simply state the facts with complete objectivity and do not make insinuations. Negative coverage is defined as that which connects negative events distinctly to the professional wrestling industry, and may also contain writer bias. For example, the fact that Benoit was a wrestler played a role in his actions. Further research will determine whether public perception of the industry is affected in accordance to the fashion in which the Benoit incident was covered by the media.

Knowing how the print media covers the industry and if the public's image of professional wrestling is affected by media coverage, public relations practitioners in professional wrestling will learn if they need to focus their media relations strategies

more urgently on newspapers and how much the public is influenced by media coverage in general.

Problem Statement

Did media coverage of the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide influence public opinion of the professional wrestling industry?

The public reaches out to the media to provide it with coverage of information concerning events that it cannot otherwise reach itself. The information and manner in which it is provided can frame the way the public will react to organizations and events being covered by the media.

Johnson (2007) has established that the television media linked Benoit and his use of steroids to the professional wrestling business. Such a manner of coverage paints the industry, particularly the WWE, in a negative light.

This researcher will determine if newspapers covered the incident in a similar fashion. From that, this researcher will further determine if the media in general played a role in forming public opinion based upon the methods and tone employed in providing coverage of professional wrestling to its audiences.

Public relations practitioners will be better suited at handling media relations strategies during crisis situations, such as the Benoit incident, by knowing how the media is likely to cover them and if greater importance needs to be paid to the media as a result of any influence it may have over the public's perception of the industry.

Purpose

The researcher chose to study this question because of the scrutiny plaguing the professional wrestling industry as a result of the double murder-suicide committed by Chris Benoit on June 25, 2007.

The WWE (2007) considered media coverage of the incident sensationalistic. The company implied that the press presented a bias against the WWE and the professional wrestling industry as a whole, predominately through blaming potential steroid involvement in the Benoit incident on them. That angle was highly evident in television coverage.

Newspaper coverage has not been granted the same attention as television media. Eggerton (2005) established it is still a trusted news source. As a result, discovering how the print media covered the incident is just as vital for public relations practitioners in the industry for improved media relations.

Through studying media coverage by newspapers and the impact that media coverage in general has on the public perception of professional wrestling, the researcher intends to find if there is negativity in professional wrestling coverage and if the negative image aids in the formation of public opinion.

Hypothesis 1: It is expected that newspapers portrayed professional wrestling in a negative manner following the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide.

According to David Skolnick, co-publisher of *Wrestling Perspective*, the Benoit incident took on a life of its own.

We have tabloid TV and tabloid publications taking care of this story first. Then the mainstream media says, "Well, that's interesting; maybe we'll do a story on it." The columnists and the top fifty newspapers were getting involved in formulating opinions, but it wasn't immediate. It was against that same attitude of, "It's [Professional wrestling is] more suited for supermarket tabloids than for me." With that touch of condensation, newspapers across the country agree wrestling's buffoonery had morphed into dangerous buffoonery, (Johnson, 2007, p. 118-119).

Newspapers avoided covering professional wrestling for years based on the content of its programming. But the Benoit incident provided the media a much different story related to the industry that needed to be covered. And while hesitant at first to give professional wrestling a lot of attention, the press gave more space in its newspapers over to wrestling. That coverage, however, was based on speculation of the dangerous world of professional wrestling.

Hypothesis 2: It is expected that the media influence the public perception of professional wrestling.

According to a World-Information.org report entitled "Media Control and the Influence of Public Discourse," (2007):

As citizens rely on information to make ... choices, media are an important element in the process of public opinion formation. They decide which topics and issues are on the agenda or not; which individuals or societal groups are given broadcasting time or publishing space and which aspects and facts are presented or suppressed. Media therefore have the ability to influence public opinion and those controlling the media are to a certain extent capable of altering the nature of discourse in their desired direction, (n.p.).

The media's purpose is to serve the public interest and inform said public of events that it could not otherwise research itself. Learning information relayed by the

media is how the public educates itself on those events. Thus, the media plays a large role in the formation of public opinion.

Procedure

To determine if media coverage of the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide impacted public opinion of the professional wrestling industry, the researcher first examined how newspapers covered the Benoit incident. The researcher conducted a content analysis of two national newspapers for the study – *The New York Times* and *The Miami Herald*. From January 1, 2007 – the start of Donald Trump’s involvement in WWE storylines – to September 25, 2007 – three months after the Benoit incident, the researcher coded the tone of each article that discussed professional wrestling in the publications. The purpose was to determine whether the media portrays wrestling in a positive, neutral or negative manner.

The researcher followed this content analysis by conducting 60 intercept surveys at two sports bars located in southern New Jersey. The purpose of the intercepts was to measure fans’ perceptions of professional wrestling, both prior to and after the Benoit incident, as well as determine what aided them in forming those opinions.

Delimitations

The researcher will not examine any newspapers other than *The New York Times* and *The Miami Herald*.

The researcher will not conduct intercept studies in areas other than southern New Jersey. The researcher will not use any method other than convenience sampling due to time and location restraints. Incentives will not be provided to participants due to limited funding.

Summary

As a result of the double murder-suicide committed by 21-year ring veteran Chris Benoit on June 25, 2007, the entire professional wrestling industry was given much more attention in the mainstream press than it was previously granted. Considered a “fake” sport by many, professional wrestling became a lot more “real.”

The media coverage on television following this incident was negative. Even before autopsy results were revealed, cable news programming like *Nancy Grace* and *MSNBC Live* pushed an angle linking steroids to Benoit’s killings, and thus steroids to the WWE and professional wrestling as a whole, (Johnson, 2007).

Newspaper coverage of the incident has not been studied as much, however. While Johnson (2007) says that there was an increase in coverage as a result of the Benoit incident, in what fashion that coverage was formed is not stated. The public utilizes the media to learn about events it cannot research itself. Since newspapers are still a trusted news source despite the growth of television and the Internet, it’s important to understand how newspapers cover professional wrestling.

The researcher conducted content analysis studies of two newspapers to garner an understanding of how the print media covered professional wrestling from the Benoit incident. The researcher then performed intercept studies to determine if media coverage in general aided in public opinion formation about the professional wrestling industry. From this research, public relations practitioners in the professional wrestling industry will have a better understanding of how newspapers cover its product and if media coverage overall influences the public. As a result, they may plan their media relations strategies accordingly.

Terminology

Babyface – The term used in professional wrestling jargon to denote the “good guy” in any match, angle, and storyline.

Heel – The term used in professional wrestling jargon to denote the “bad guy” in any match, angle, and storyline.

Kayfabe – The characters, angles and storylines produced within professional wrestling programming. When a performer steps out of the boundaries of his or her character, it is considered breaking kayfabe.

World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) – World Wrestling Entertainment is the largest promotion in the professional wrestling industry. Vincent K McMahon, Jr. is the majority of the WWE, and has been since purchasing the then World Wrestling Federation (WWF) from his father, Vincent J. McMahon, in 1982. Since McMahon’s purchase, the WWE had produced some the most memorable stars in the professional wrestling’s history, including Hulk Hogan, “The Macho Man” Randy Savage, Bret “The Hitman” Hart, Stone Cold Steve Austin and The Rock. The WWE currently presents five hours of weekly original television programming between three shows, *Monday Night RAW*, *Smackdown!* and *ECW on Sci-Fi*. The WWE also produces approximately 12 yearly Pay-Per-Views shows, which are highlighted annually by *WrestleMania* in late-March, early-April. More information about the WWE can be found at corporate.wwe.com.

Chapter Two

History of Professional Wrestling in America

Professional wrestling was not always the display seen on television today as “sports-entertainment,” a term coined by World Wrestling Entertainment chairman Vince McMahon.

According to Scott M. Beekman (2006), professional wrestling began in the American colonies in the late seventeenth century. Following England’s model for the sport, social classes were separated in exhibitions and matches were held for both settling disputes and as forms of entertainment at festivals and taverns. A performer’s worth was based on his achievements in the sport. Both the wrestler and entertainment provider, such as the tavern owner, benefited financially from exhibitions. Professional wrestling was even a common practice among many of the country’s first presidents, including George Washington, according to Beekman (2006).

George Washington was an avid wrestler, as were most southern youths, and the first in a long line of grappling presidents. Washington’s concern over physical fitness led him to promote “games of exercise for amusement” the American Revolution. Wrestling was part of militia training in the south, and the future president believed that athletic activities made his men better soldiers, (p. 7).

Professional wrestling was mainly a southern activity, dispelled by northern colonies as “rowdy and low class.” Instead, northern colonies participated in ball sports and racing. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, professional wrestling became a more violent form of physical activity as opposed to a discipline. It became

more civilized, however, as settlers called for adjusted rules to limit more dangerous activity in matches, such as biting and eye gauging.

In an interview with Sharon Mazer (1990), former professional wrestler and current trainer Johnny Rodz described professional wrestling in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as featuring “monsters” who challenged opposition for money in a circus-style atmosphere. Actual fights did still occur according to Mazer. However, the likelihood of a challenger walking out victorious with cash in hand was rather slim.

This circus-like endeavor was one of the first few signs that wrestling was beginning to change from a competition among athletes to an exercise in entertainment. Regardless of the ending of each challenge, the main purpose for a showman was to elicit crowd reaction.

The genuinely competitive sport of professional wrestling – if it ever actually existed – must have rapidly given way to a consciously and conspicuously constructed spectacle in which the object was not so much to win a contest as to attract audience attention, (Mazer, 1990, p. 103).

Wrestling’s centricity around crowd reaction not only developed a glitzier product, but also the driving force behind the modern product seen today. Really by the turn of the century, the modernized version of professional wrestling known by fans today began to develop (Beekman, 2006). The more involved spectators became in the overall atmosphere of wrestling contests, the more money they spent on tickets and merchandise. Money drove wrestling to become more of a business. And as with any sport, athletes rarely deal with business-like specifics of their competition. Other agents perform those duties.

Wrestling promoters emerged because they saw a cash cow inside the ring. Wrestlers put on an entertaining show that resulted in dollars being spent. But there wasn't any organization to the event. That became the role of the promoter.

The promoter's job was to build an event that would provoke passionate response in a committed repeat audience. As promoters took over the game, wrestlers vied for choice spots in the circuits by augmenting their performances with more attention-getting behavior and devices. In turn, promoters found themselves in competition with each other for the most charismatic wrestlers, (Mazer, 1990, p. 104).

In search of those charismatic wrestlers, legitimate athletic skill always took a back seat. Promoters simply wanted to find the right wrestlers to garner crowd reaction, positive or negative.

In "The Buzz on Professional Wrestling," (2001), Scott Keith recalls the change in the business due to promoter influence.

... promoters learned that while displays of athleticism might entertain people in the short term, even more money could be made if they could control these displays ... whereas before success was measured by the actual skill level of the person in question, now it became measured by how many people the promoter could convince to watch that person wrestle, (p. 33).

Promoters separated themselves territorially. Each organization in this system was recognized mostly by its location, where its "headquarters" was located.

According to J.D. Pratten (2003) in "Professional Wrestling – Multi-million Pound Soap Opera of Sports Entertainment," many promoters collectively established themselves as the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) in 1948. This allowed for a nationally recognized champion who could compete at shows for all NWA members, driving up fan interest in attending shows.

Eventually, two other promotions broke off to become their own entities. Verne Gagne's American Wrestling Association (AWA) was established in 1957, while the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF) formed from a split in 1963. These two promotions, along with the remnants of Jim Crockett's NWA formed the big three companies of the 1980s.

McMahon purchased the WWWF from his father, Vincent J. McMahon, in 1979. He renamed the company the "World Wrestling Federation (WWF)" and developed the business into a marketing machine around showmen. McMahon cared predominately for the entertainment value of a show and very little about the action taking place inside the ring. This was a stark contrast to the AWA, which valued talented wrestling over marketability. McMahon was able to prosper from utilizing the commercial power of many wrestlers formerly employed by Gagne, including Hulk Hogan. The AWA eventually went out of business in 1991, (Pratten, 2003).

The WWF's main competition was World Championship Wrestling (WCW). In 1988, media conglomerate Ted Turner purchased the NWA from Crockett. Through much of the 1990s, the WWF and WCW feuded with each other over dominance in the industry, mostly through a competition of who could produce the more edgy material. The war ended in 2001, when Turner sold WCW and all of its properties to McMahon. At the same time, a smaller company with a cult following, Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW), faced bankruptcy and was purchased by McMahon, forming the largest powerhouse in the business between accessible performers and archived video footage.

Today, there is very little competition for the WWE on the grand scale. Total Nonstop Action (TNA) Wrestling is the closest model of a No. 2 promotion to the WWE. However, the company, which is based mostly around former WWE wrestlers, is not a threat in its current state with far less yearly events, much lower average attendance numbers at its shows, and far less funding than the WWE. TNA's ability to ever pose a legitimate threat to the WWE product is slim, (Beekman, 2006).

Sociological Perspectives of Wrestling

Most research into professional wrestling on an academic level delves into the sociological aspects of the industry, according to Beekman (2006). Violence and gender roles are the most focused areas of study when wrestling is studied at all.

Violence

The very nature of professional wrestling is to portray violence between two or more participants.

In "The Raw Nature of Televised Professional Wrestling: Is the Violence a Cause for Concern," (2005), Ron Taborini, Paul Skalski, Kenneth Lachlan, David Westerman, Jeff Davis, and Stacy L. Smith concluded "wrestling is not only unremitting but is more likely to be portrayed as justified, unpunished, and lacking extreme harm," (p. 216).

In a content analysis of 36 hours of televised professional wrestling programming from 2002, the researchers found that there were nearly 14 accounts of violent interactions per hour. Most of this violence was rooted in anger and for retaliatory purposes. The consequences of the violence were mild and 94 percent of the violence accounts witnessed in the programming went unpunished, (Tamborini, et. al., 2005).

According to Michael Atkinson in “Fifty Million Viewers Can’t Be Wrong: Professional wrestling, Sports-Entertainment, and Mimesis,” (2002), violence is the central theme in professional wrestling. It is not the result of something else, such as a body check in an ice hockey game that results from the competition process where the main objective is to score goals. The purpose of a professional wrestling match is to prove that one’s athletic prowess and physical competency is greater than his opponent’s by causing him harm through violence. From that perspective, while in other sports, violent actions merely result as an aside to the athletic competition in the game being played, the whole point of professional wrestling is to be violent.

Wrestling, however, uses the concept of sport as its basis for accepted violence, according to Atkinson. The appeal of violence in wrestling is that it likens itself to professional sport, even if it is not wholly considered one itself. Professional wrestling’s existence in the sports world cannot be rejected, as it resembles sport. In that vein, professional wrestling justifies its use of violence as a form of athletic competition, regardless of its predetermined nature (Atkinson, 2002).

Gender Roles

The roles of males and females in professional wrestling performance are distinctly different.

In an industry built around masculinity, physicality and athletic prowess, female involvement is often viewed as both secondary and only sexual in nature when it does occur.

In an assessment of sports and professional wrestling programming, Michael A. Messner, Michele Dunbar and Darnell Hunt developed “The Televised Sports Manhood

Formula,” (2000). Through a sample of approximately 23 hours of programming that included sports newscasts, extreme sports, professional wrestling, professional basketball, professional football, and professional baseball, the researchers derived on some dominant themes displayed in the broadcast.

From their textual analysis, the researchers found that white males are predominantly the voice of sports broadcasts. Though women play roles as sideline reporters and backstage interviewers in professional wrestling, men are the authority. In the WWE, all six lead announcers (Jim Ross, Jerry “The King” Lawler, Michael Cole, John Bradshaw Layfield, Joey Styles and Tazz) are male. There was a 24-4 difference in the instances of male announcers to female announcers during the sample programming, (Messner, et. al., 2000).

Men were also much more prevalent in sports newscasts and commercials for all sports programming. Including voice-over work, men were represented in 96.1 percent of the commercials played during programming, (Messner, et. al., 2000).

Females are also found to be used solely for their sexuality. Though in professional wrestling, female wrestlers do compete in matches much like male wrestlers, they are still exploited with revealing clothing and through the use of maneuvers that carry sexual overtones. Women are also mostly obedient to the male wrestlers, merely a trophy to their side for their looks and not necessarily their expertise. Females are completely secondary to males in wrestling and have bodies for looks over athletics, (Messner, et. al., 2000).

Male wrestlers play a different role. They are not nearly as submissive and not viewed as merely sexual objects, especially in competition. Men must be aggressive and

exhibit their physical prowess at any cost. According to Danielle Soulliere's "Wrestling with Masculinity: Messages About Manhood in the WWE," (2006), men are only men by defeating those inferior to them and never showing emotion in the process.

Within the set of wrestlers, both male and female, are faces (good guys) and heels (bad guys). This distinction is more recognizable and utilized with males. These two categories of male performers adhere to a different set of values when it comes to showcasing their masculinity. Faces must rise up against their oppressive foe in the last few moments of a match to be deemed a clutch conqueror in their victories. Heels use every trick in the book to be viewed as evil, through verbal and unspoken tactics. They dominate matches against faces through cheating or through the cheating of a manager or valet. If they win a match, cheating is the reason they did so. If they lose, it's because of the face's ability to beat the odds and come back from almost certain defeat, which is almost always attributed to the fan participation, (Mazer, 1990).

This separation is not as cut and dry anymore, however. Wrestling today offers a more difficult set of wrestling personalities to differentiate between heel and face. Most of them can play both roles. According to James Collins, Hilary Hylton and William James' "Lords of the ring" in *TIME*, "Now no one is reliably good. The emphasis is all on rebellion and arrogance, black leather and shades," (1998).

Professional Wrestling as Sport

Whether professional wrestling is considered a sport has been the subject of debate. While the earliest incarnation of the activity in American culture exhibited

legitimate bouts, an aspect of theater has been mixed into its current form of scripted matches.

Atkinson (2002) noted that professional wrestling utilizes traits of sport in order for its violence to be deemed accepted. But is it a sport itself, or merely “sports-entertainment” as coined by Vince McMahon?

According to the Internet dictionary, Dictionary.com, sport is defined as “an activity involving physical exertion and skill that is governed by a set of rules or customs and is often undertaken competitively,” (2006). By this account, professional wrestling fits the sports mold. Professional wrestling is physical in nature and is governed by rules, albeit kayfabe, with the appearance of competition, albeit predetermined.

The scripted nature of professional wrestling does not allow it to completely attach itself to the sports genre. But it does possess the elements of sport.

Although professional wrestling is not deemed pure sport, sport is its closest relative. As an industry that mimics sport, according to Atkinson (2002), the only real difference between professional wrestling and legitimate sports such as football, basketball and hockey is that the outcomes are prearranged and the violence is staged. However, it is still rooted in athletic competition presented for the entertainment of its audience.

Sports Public Relations

As a sport, professional wrestling’s handling of crisis situations such as the Chris Benoit double-murder suicide should mirror the public relations practices of major North

American professional sports leagues and teams. The list of black eyes suffered by those sports entities is endless.

Major League Baseball's history offers a smorgasbord of indiscretions, including the "Black Sox" scandal of 1919 and Pete Rose betting on baseball while a manager of the Cincinnati Reds. The latest dilemma in the MLB is that of steroids – perpetrated by Jose Canseco's book, "Juiced: Wild Times, Rampant 'Roids, Smash Hits, and How Baseball Got Big" and furthered by congressional hearings and "The Mitchell Report." The league has shown, however, that with progress in remedying crises comes positive outlook from sports officials and fans, alike.

According to Bill Shaikin of The Los Angeles Times (2008), the MLB is not yet removed from the steroids era but it's on the right track. Shaikin quoted Chicago Cubs first baseman Derrek Lee and coach Alan Trammell as not having spoken to fans about steroids at all during spring training in 2008. In the same article, commissioner Bud Selig declares his satisfaction with the league's improvement when it comes to steroid use.

I'm proud of where baseball is. We've got the toughest testing program in American sports. We've banned amphetamines. We're funding [research into] an HGH test. We're engaged in a lot of public relations stuff. We've made enormous progress. That's what our fans think too. That's why we've had the support we've had, and we'll do even better this year. They know we've done something about it, (n.p.).

Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim owner Arte Moreno, known league-wide for his honesty and pursuance of making baseball more fan friendly, agrees. He notes that while fans still care about the integrity of the game, they're more interested in the competition of the game today. Angels outfielder Torii Hunter attributes this to an effective testing policy that has decreased the amount of detected steroid abusers in the MLB.

Los Angeles' Dodgers chief operating office Dennis Mannion stated that when "The Mitchell Report" came out, people were generally not surprised by the findings. Everything that came out of the report was already known information. It only provided a few more faces to the steroid scandal. But the problems and solutions discussed by former Senator George Mitchell were already known and widely understood. Dodgers' coach Don Mattingly furthered the point by claiming he believes it's "redundant" to continue discussions of something that happened in 2001 seven years later.

The steady flow of information from the league to the publics about progress in testing and other policies related to drug use in baseball allowed for the current viewpoint held by the fans. An important way of doing this is through the media.

Media Relations

In a case study of the National Basketball Association, John A. Fortunato (2000) discovered that the NBA set two objectives toward its media relations practices: make the league easy to cover and promote the league to aid its growth. According to Chris Brienza, the NBA Director of Sports Media Relations:

... from a service standpoint we've become a 24-hour operation. A couple of years ago we got into fax on demand. Anyone covering the NBA from anywhere in the world would be able to access game notes, box scores, statistics, all of that, 24 hour a day just by having a fax machine. We really took it a step further with NBA.COM, which is now like one-stop shopping if you are a media member. It has game notes, box scores, stats, shot charts now. It is an archive now as well, which is something we didn't have before. You can go get a box score from two years ago, (Fortunato, 2000, p. 485).

This operation is similar to that of the National Hockey League, which has a media Web site dedicated toward providing press access to information it may need when covering the league.

Fortunato (2000) also notes that as a result of the league providing the information, the NBA plays a role in setting the agenda and framing the coverage of potential stories in the most positive light it can.

Thus, the key to positive media relations is an open stance where access to information is readily available. Not only does this help the media, but it also allows the league to aid in formation of stories in a positive light and through the explanation of issues the media may not understand.

Professional Wrestling and the Media

Professional wrestling's stance toward the media has been predominately closed – opposite of the NBA and NHL structure. As a result, the media is left to its own devices when covering professional wrestling. As a result, most coverage is negative, according to Michael David Smith (2007).

... working as the WWE's public relations firm isn't the media's job. The problem with media coverage of pro wrestling isn't that reporters don't cover the positives often enough, it's that reporters don't understand the industry well enough to put the negatives in the proper context, (n.p.).

According to Steven Johnson (2007), Nancy Grace needed outside help from industry experts to understand the business while she covered the Chris Benoit incident on her programming. That outside help did not come from the WWE, but instead renowned insider Dave Meltzer.

The WWE also becomes defensive whenever the media portrays the company in a negative light. The WWE posted a press release on its corporate Web site

(corporate.wwe.com) to prove its disappointment with sensationalistic reporting over the Benoit double-murder suicide. The company was also quick to attack CNN following the airing of a documentary that focused on steroid use in the WWE. According to Ashish Pabari of 411mania.com (2007):

CNN edited their Sunday airing of their pro-wrestling documentary. The edited version shows John Cena stating that he has “absolutely not” taken steroids. The previous airings showed an answer Cena gave that was out of context and made it appear as if he was saying he had taken steroids and that he would never be caught. WWE exposed CNN a few days ago by posting the unedited CNN/Cena interview on their website, clearly showing that CNN took a Cena comment completely out of context in an attempt to make him and WWE look bad, (n.p.).

CNN was no different than other television news sources in this light. Though other stations did not air documentaries, their coverage was negative in blaming the WWE for steroid use among its wrestlers, especially Benoit.

Television vs. Newspapers

The American Society of Newsroom Editors (1999) discovered that people view newspaper coverage more credibly than television coverage by 16 percentage points. This is due to the public’s perception that newspapers are more accurate with their reporting and spend more time giving greater detail and explanations to their stories.

Though newspapers rank high as a trusted news source, television is trusted more by the public. However, this trust is based on reasoning such as immediacy in television coverage and the fact that people responded as just trusting it. Newspaper trust is a result of better investigation. People were also concerned that television news focused more on

the personalities presenting it and that stations cared more about profits than public interest.

With more accurate news that's a result of better investigation practices, newspapers are more likely to cover stories in a factual manner than television news will. With the objective of presenting their personalities over the issues, and worrying about dollar signs over serving the public, television has a greater tendency to report news with less factual accuracy and more room for bias.

Summary

The literature review shows that professional wrestling has evolved as an industry. Once legitimate sport, the business became spectacle at the hands of promoters who could make money based on crowd reaction. That reaction is now obtained through the use of violence by male performers and the sexuality of female performers. The use of violence as a means of athletic competition likens wrestling to sport. Being similar to sport means professional wrestling public relations practices concerning crisis situations, like the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide, should mimic those used by professional sports leagues like the National Basketball Association and National Hockey League. By remaining open and accessible to the public with constant updates, professional sport receives a better chance of maintaining and restoring its image through the media better than it would with a closed stance toward media relations, such has been the mantra of the WWE. By following the sports model of an open stance toward public relations, professional wrestling can garner more positive coverage. This is especially important with the print media, as newspapers are highly trusted and viewed more credibly than

television news sources. The researcher will determine where professional wrestling currently stands with the newspaper media as a result of coverage following the Benoit incident, and if media coverage in general is alarming enough in its influence over public perception that better media relations practices need to be developed.

Chapter Three

Study Design

The media's portrayal of professional wrestling and the subsequent opinion held by the public about professional wrestling following the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide will be studied through quantitative and qualitative research.

The initial quantitative study or content analysis will be conducted using two newspapers to see how the print media covered professional wrestling prior to, during and after the Benoit incident.

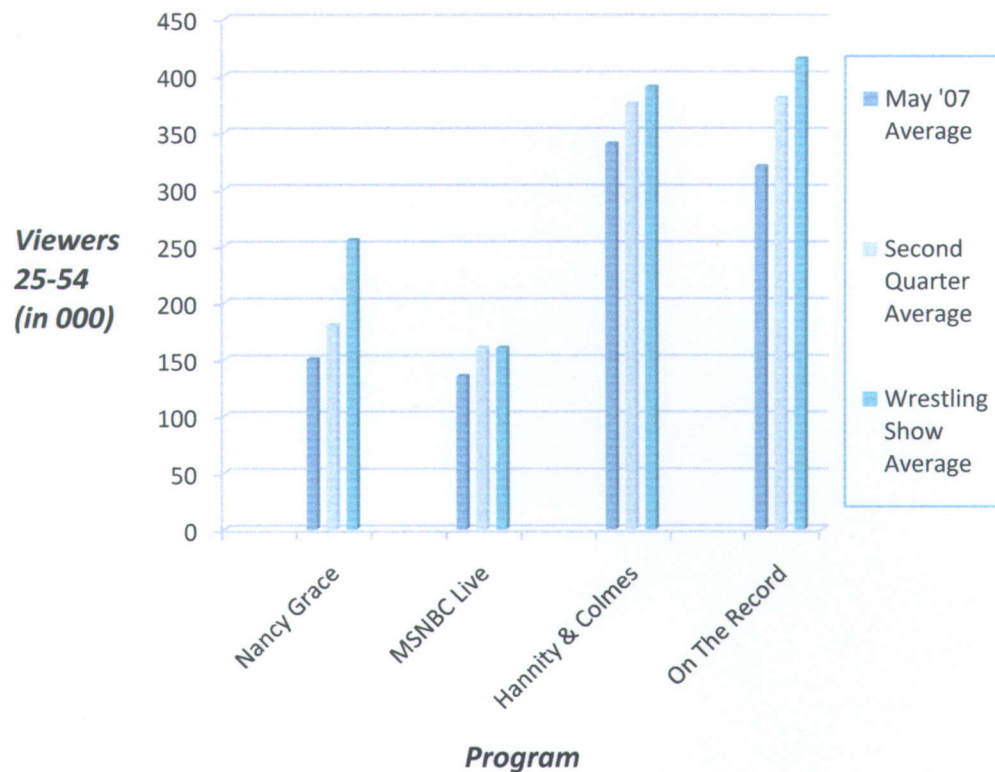
Articles pertaining to professional wrestling will be coded as positive, neutral or negative in tone. A positive article is one that casts no ill light on the professional wrestling industry, separating negative activities from the industry or linking positive ones to it. A neutral article simply states the facts, neither placing professional wrestling in a positive light nor insinuating the industry's involvement in negative activity by its workers. A negative article casts the blame of negative events, such as the Benoit incident, on the professional wrestling industry.

Upon understanding the print media's role in forming an image of professional wrestling, the researcher will conduct an intercept study pertaining to the media in general. The intercept study will determine public opinion of the professional wrestling industry and pinpoint what aids the public in forming those opinions.

Figure 1 illustrates the rise of television viewership for several news programs with coverage of the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide.

FIGURE 1

**The increase of cable news ratings based on coverage of the Chris Benoit
double murder-suicide**



Source: Benoit: Wrestling with the Horror That Destroyed a Family and Crippled a Sport (2007)

Data Collection

The content analysis will be conducted using *The New York Times* and *The Miami Herald*. *The Miami Herald* was selected for its more thorough coverage of professional wrestling compared to other newspapers. *The New York Times* was selected because of its national appeal. Fifteen articles will be selected from *The Miami Herald* and 23 from *The New York Times*.

The intercept surveys will be distributed at two sports bars in southern New Jersey during the first two weeks of April 2008– P.J. Whelihan’s in Sewell, N.J. and Landmark in Glassboro, N.J. The southern New Jersey market was selected because of its vicinity to Philadelphia and its attraction to residents of the Delaware Valley region. Although sports fans are not imperative to the research, they are more likely to have a knowledgeable opinion of professional wrestling. As a result, the researcher will conduct this research where sports fans are most likely to be found. Sample size at each location will be 30 respondents.

Data Methods

The content analysis will be conducted from December 2007 to March 2008. Both *The New York Times* and *The Miami Herald* will be studied through database searches from the timeframe of January 1, 2007 to September 25, 2007. The time span encompasses the beginning of billionaire real estate tycoon Donald Trump’s involvement on World Wrestling Entertainment television as part of a WrestleMania 23 storyline through the three months following the Chris Benoit double-murder suicide. The beginning part of the time frame was selected as Trump’s appearances on WWE television produced a heightened sense of interest on the industry. The latter portion of the time frame was selected because results of a study of Benoit’s brain were released earlier in September. The keywords *Chris Benoit*, *WWE*, *professional wrestling*, *TNA*, *Donald Trump* and *WrestleMania* will be used to locate articles.

Each published article will be read by the researcher and one other coder for intercoder reliability. The articles will be coded as positive, neutral or negative based on the writer’s link between professional wrestling and its workers to activities (good or

bad.) Articles are deemed positive if the writer makes a direct connection between positive activities and professional wrestling, or clearly separated negative events from the professional wrestling industry. Articles that discuss the WWE registering millions of youth voters or outlining the lack of evidence behind a WWE involvement in the Benoit incident are examples of positive articles. An article is neutral if the writer simply states the facts and never makes a direct correlation between the professional wrestling industry and positive or negative activity. For example, a writer may discuss the Benoit incident and the fact that he worked for the WWE, but won't say that the WWE played a role in it or that the WWE didn't play a role in it. A negative article is one that directly links the industry to negative events. An article that says Benoit took steroids because he was a professional wrestler fits into this category. Headlines will also be coded for positive, neutral or negative tone for comparison to their matching articles and as separate aspects of media coverage since they are written by a different editor than the articles.

The intercept study will be conducted over a two-week time span. Sixty total surveys will be completed by respondents at the sports bars, with thirty respondents at each location. All completed surveys will be used for the study, regardless of whether respondents are sports or professional wrestling fans. The selection process will be conducted through convenient sampling.

Data Analysis

All results will be hand tabulated. The results of the content analysis will be studied to determine the manner in which the newspapers portrayed professional wrestling: positive, neutral or negative. The results of the intercept studies will be

considered to determine public opinion of professional wrestling, and what aided in forming that public opinion. Combined, these quantitative and qualitative studies will be used to determine whether the manner in which the media portrays professional wrestling influences public opinion of the industry. These results and interpretations of the results are examined in the following chapters.

Chapter Four

Results

After establishing the required research for this study in Chapter Three along with its delimitations in Chapter One, the researcher conducted the content analysis and intercept studies for qualitative and quantitative data.

The results of this study show the manner in which newspapers portrayed the professional wrestling industry following the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide on June 25, 2007. The results also show the public's perception of the professional wrestling industry related to the intake of media coverage about the Benoit incident.

Hypothesis 1: It is expected that newspapers portrayed professional wrestling in a negative manner following the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide.

Although the researcher conducted the content analysis from January 1, 2007 through September 25, 2007, only articles published starting June 25, 2007 were relevant to hypothesis one. Articles before that date appeared before the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide and are not suitable for understanding how the media covered the professional wrestling industry based on that incident.

Twenty-five of 38 total articles published in *The New York Times* and *The Miami Herald* during this study's entire timeframe appeared between June 25, 2007 and September 25, 2007.

The New York Times published 16 articles following the Benoit incident.

Coverage was coded as predominately neutral, with 11 of the articles possessing a neutral tone. Two articles were coded as positive and three were negative.

Most of *The New York Times*'s coverage revolved around the Benoit incident. Ten articles related to the double murder-suicide. Articles discussed the actual incident, WWE's drug-testing policy and alterations to Benoit's Wikipedia.com page. Seven of those articles were neutral in tone, while the other three were negative. The other articles dealt with the death of Bryan "Crush" Adams, NFL cornerback Adam "Pacman" Jones entering the professional wrestling industry with Total Nonstop Action Wrestling, the WWE's expansion into the Chinese market and an interview with WWE chief executive officer, Linda McMahon.

Articles headlines were mostly negative and 43.75 percent matched the tone of the body copy. Tone was negative in 56.25 percent of headlines, neutral in 37.5 percent, and positive in 6.25 percent.

Figure 2

**Tone of professional wrestling articles from June 25, 2007 through
September 25, 2007 in *The New York Times***

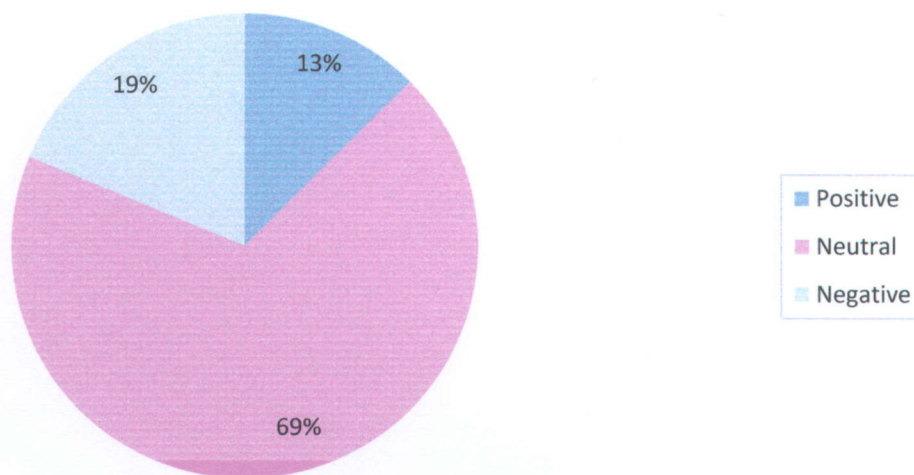
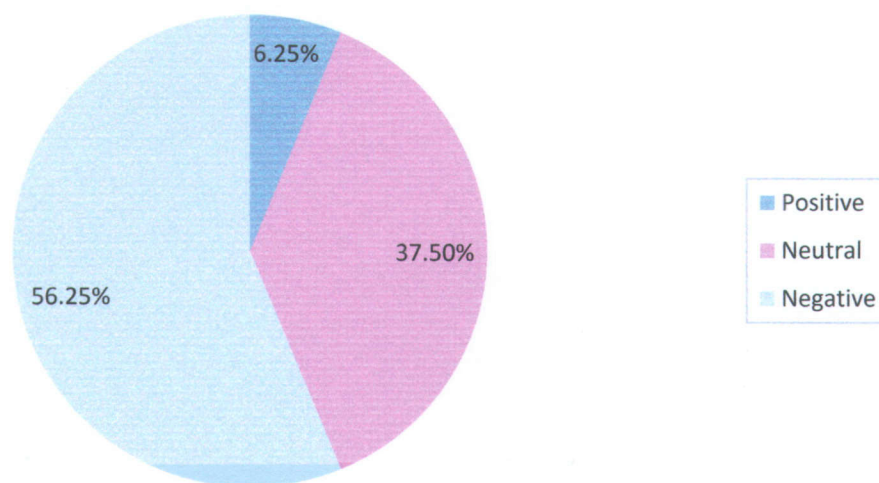


Figure 3

**Tone of professional wrestling article headlines from June 25, 2007 through
September 25, 2007 in *The New York Times***



Nine articles were published in *The Miami Herald* following the Benoit incident. Five of the articles were neutral, while two articles each were positive and negative.

As with *The New York Times*, most of the articles pertained to the Benoit case. Five articles were written about the incident. They discussed the incident, its effect on the industry and general reactions from medical and professional experts. Two of the articles were neutral, two were negative and one was positive. The four other articles were about the death of Sherri Martel, a robbery at Hulk Hogan's Florida home, an interview with TNA manager James Mitchell and a column discussing various topics in the WWE.

Tone count in headlines was very similar, with five headlines coded as neutral, three as negative and one as positive. Only one headline, however, matched its article copy in tone.

Figure 4
Tone of professional wrestling articles from June 25, 2007 through
September 25, 2007 in *The Miami Herald*

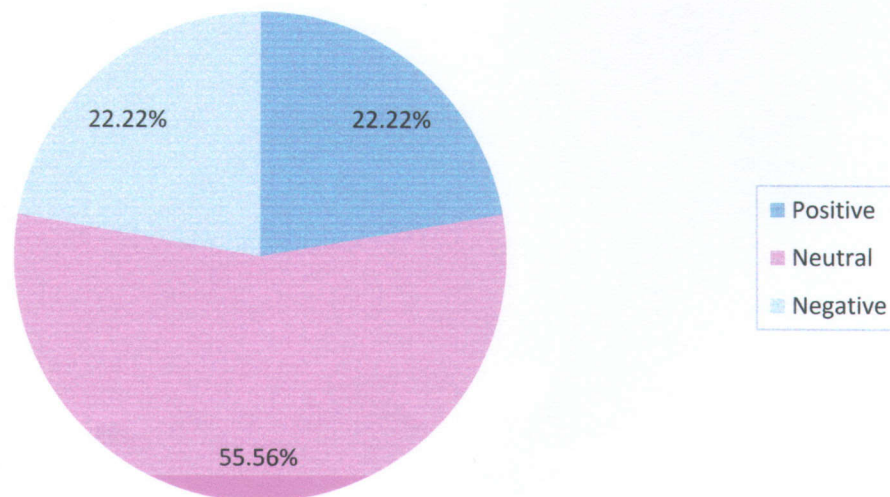
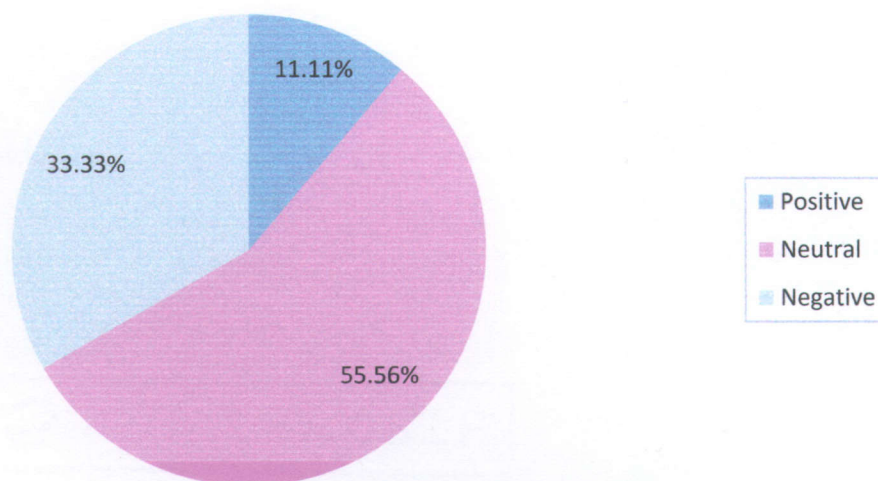


Figure 5

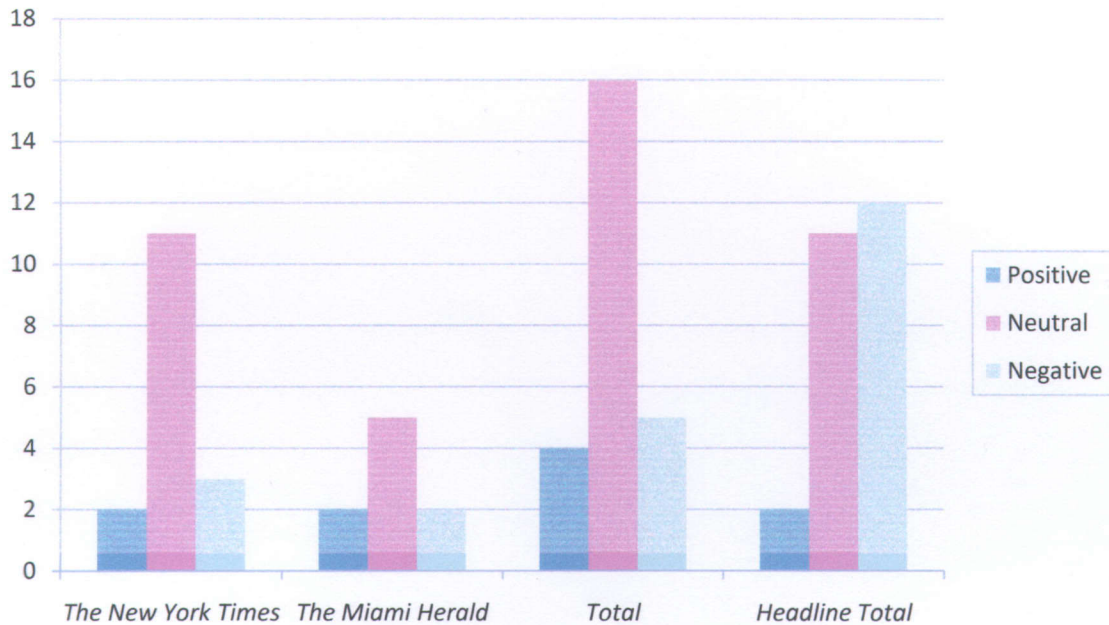
Tone of professional wrestling article headlines from June 25, 2007 through September 25, 2007 in *The Miami Herald*



Together, *The New York Times* and *The Miami Herald* produced 25 articles during the time between June 25, 2007 and September 25, 2007. Of those 25 articles, 64 percent were neutral, 20 percent were negative and 16 percent were positive. Twelve of the headlines were negative, 11 were neutral and 2 were positive in tone.

Figure 6

**Tone of professional wrestling articles from June 25, 2007 through
September 25, 2007 in *The New York Times* & *The Miami Herald***



Based on these results, media coverage of the professional wrestling industry following the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide was neutral. Articles with a neutral tone were significantly more apparent than articles with positive and negative tones. The majority of the headlines were negative. However, there was only one fewer neutral headline, which marked a much less notable difference than article tone. Thus, hypothesis one – it is expected that newspapers portrayed professional wrestling in a negative manner following the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide – is not supported by this data.

Hypothesis 2: It is expected that the media influences the public perception of professional wrestling.

Intercept studies were conducted with 30 respondents each at P.J. Whelihan's in Sewell, N.J. and Landmark in Glassboro, N.J. A total of 50 respondents were male and 10 were female.

Four of the respondents at P.J. Whelihan's were wrestling fans, three of which were male and one was female. Eight of the 26 respondents that weren't wrestling fans admitted to being fans previously. At Landmark, seven respondents were wrestling fans, all of which were male. Ten of the 23 respondents that weren't wrestling fans admitted to previously being fans.

Most respondents received information about the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide from television coverage.

At P.J. Whelihan's, twenty-six people stated that they received information about the incident from television viewing. Three people claimed to have received information from newspapers. Radio, Internet, parents and a spouse were each cited by one respondent.

Twenty-one respondents at Landmark said they watched television for their information. Seven stated they visited the Internet, six listened to the radio, two read the newspaper, three heard from their friends, one heard from a co-worker and one received information via word-of-mouth.

Figure 7

**Where respondents received their information about the Chris Benoit
double murder-suicide**

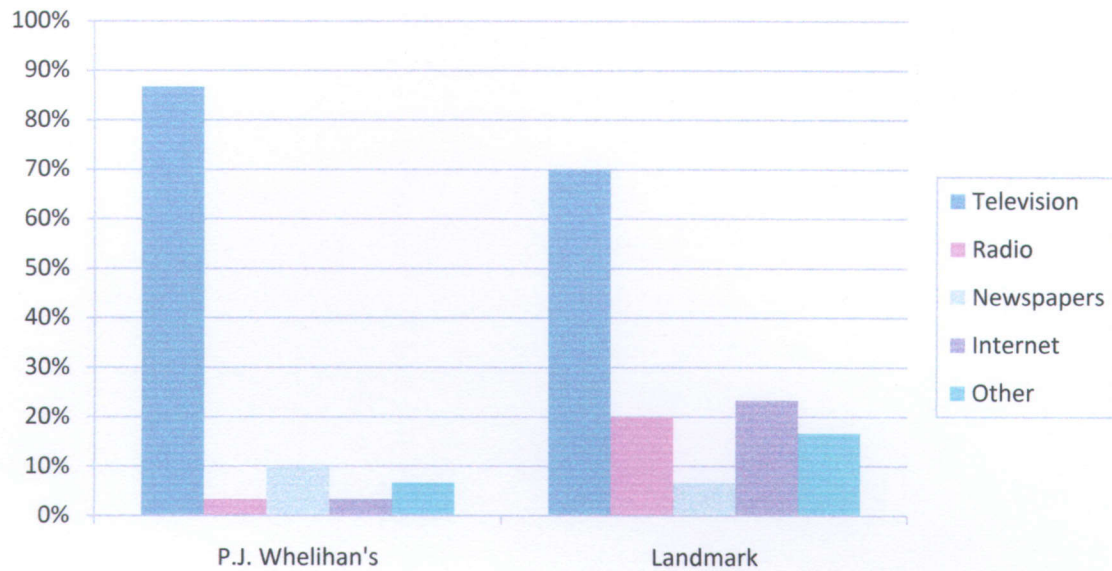
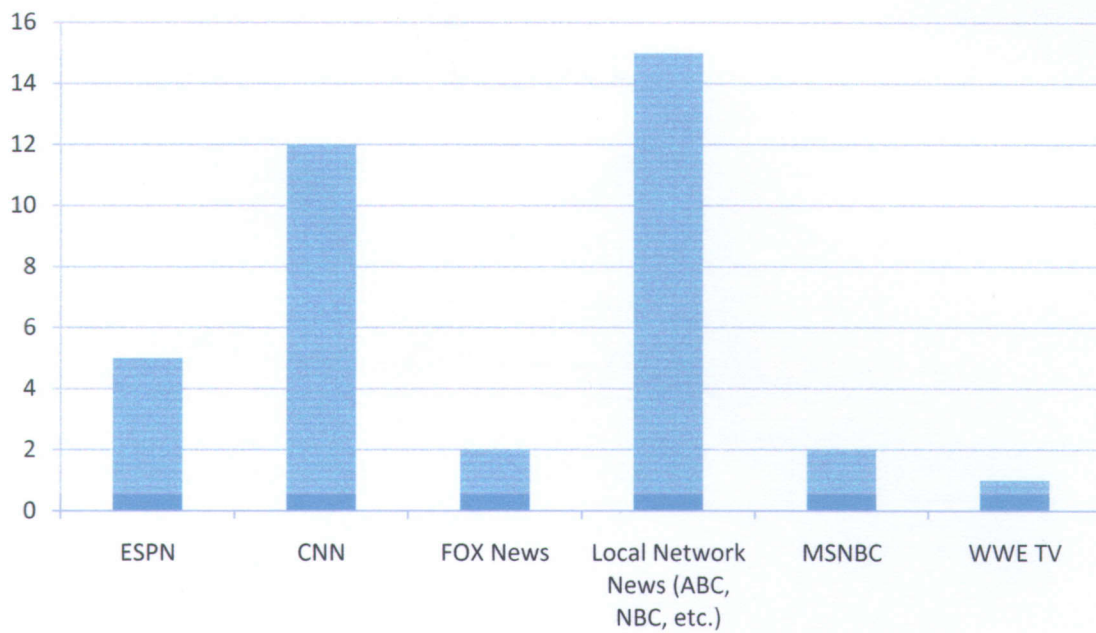


Figure 8

Television stations viewed for information on Chris Benoit double murder-suicide

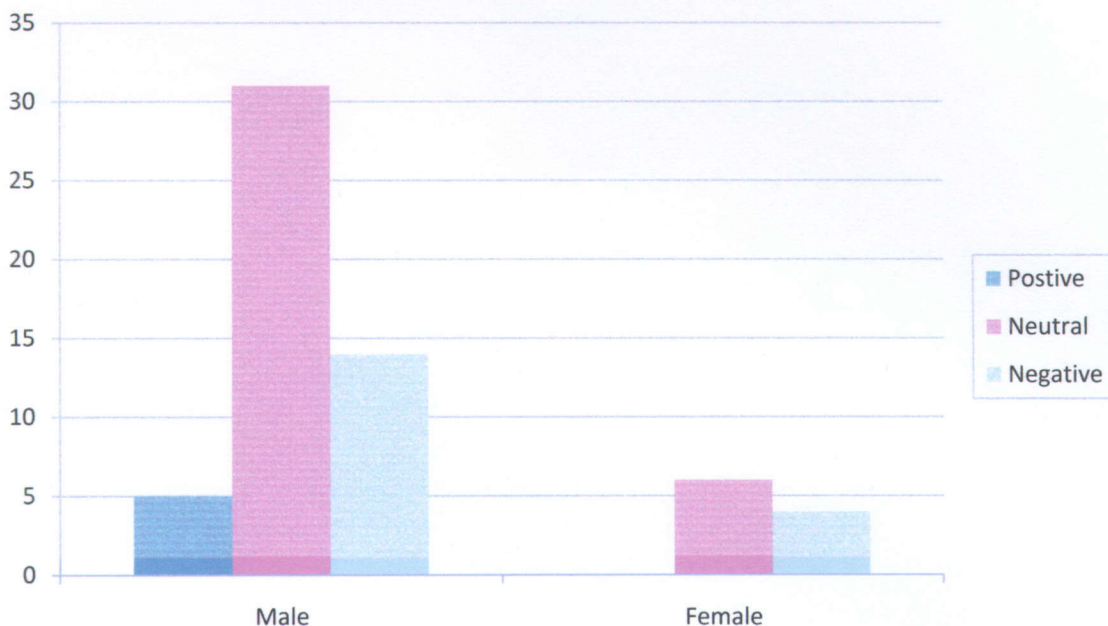


Approximately 83.33 percent of respondents at both P.J. Whelihan's and Landmark found the media accounts of the Benoit incident believable.

Based on the media accounts of the Benoit incident, most people had a neutral opinion of the professional wrestling industry. At P.J. Whelihan's, 18 people had a neutral opinion of the industry, 10 felt negatively and two were positive. Nineteen people were neutral toward the industry at Landmark, while eight were negative and three were positive.

Figure 9

Feelings toward professional wrestling industry based on media accounts, by gender



Thirteen of the people that felt neutral toward professional wrestling believed that the double murder-suicide committed by Chris Benoit was an individual action and could not be deemed a reflection of the entire industry. Six people stated that they already knew steroids were a part of the industry. Six of the respondents who had a negative perception felt that way because of drug use in the industry.

Of the 60 total respondents, seven changed their opinion of the professional wrestling industry based on the information they received from the media. Two of those respondents were wrestling fans.

Based on these results, 61.67 percent of the respondents held a neutral opinion toward the industry, which matches up with the tone of the most of the articles researched for hypothesis one. However, since only 11.67 percent of the respondents claimed to have a change of opinion based on the media accounts of the Benoit incident, those neutral feelings toward the industry were previously held beliefs. Thus, hypothesis two – it is expected that the media influence the public perception of professional wrestling – is not supported by this data.

General Findings

While conducting the content analysis of *The New York Times* and *The Miami Herald* articles, the researcher recorded additional comments not applicable to the two hypotheses being studied.

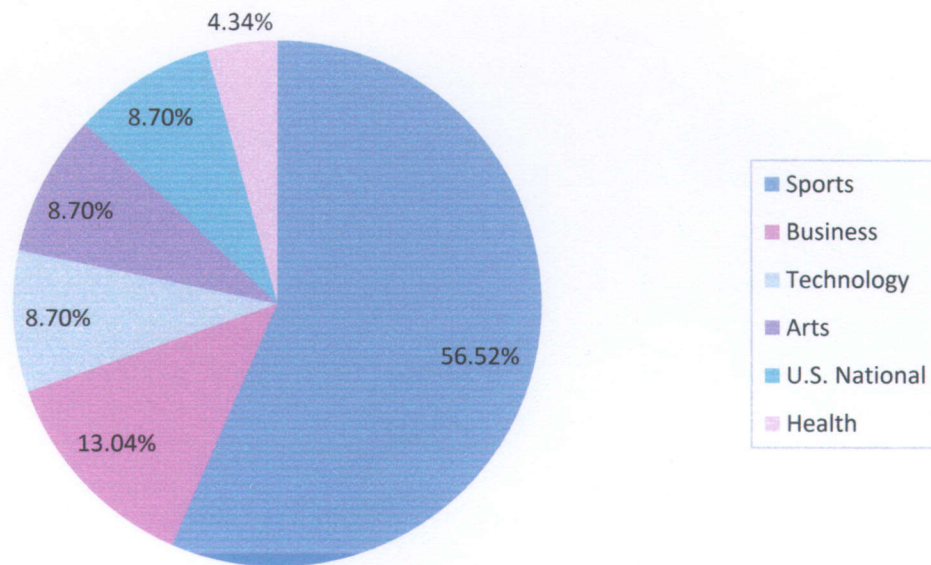
In total, both newspapers printed 15 articles prior to the Benoit double murder-suicide. In *The New York Times*, three were positive, three were neutral and one was negative. *The Miami Herald* had five positive, one neutral and zero negative articles. Combined, these newspapers covered professional wrestling in a mostly positive manner prior to the Benoit incident.

In *The New York Times*, the articles were scattered across several sections. Thirteen of the 23 total articles from January 1, 2007 to September 25, 2007 were placed in the sports section. Three were placed in business, two each were found in technology,

arts and U.S. national news. Health had one article as well. All 15 articles in *The Miami Herald* were placed in the sports section.

Figure 10

**Placement of professional wrestling articles from January 1, 2007 through
September 25, 2007 in *The New York Times***



Chapter Five

The hypotheses that formed the basis of this research were unsupported based on quantitative and qualitative data received through content analysis and intercept survey findings. The reasons why the results turned out as they did will be discussed in this chapter.

Discussion

Hypothesis 1: It is expected that newspapers portrayed professional wrestling in a negative manner following the Chris Benoit double-murder suicide.

This hypothesis was unsupported based on the number of neutral articles published in *The New York Times* and *The Miami Herald* following the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide. Only 20 percent of the 25 articles were negative in tone compared to 64 percent that were neutral.

As previously established in secondary findings, newspapers are viewed as a more credible source, according to the American Society of Newsroom Editors (1999). Accuracy in reporting is prominent over the personalities and presentation hyped by television, which mainly seeks profit. People trust television more, which Johnson (2007) claims covered the Benoit incident in a largely negative fashion. However, that trust is based on immediacy more than factual accuracy.

Most television coverage of the Benoit incident was based around reporting unproven allegations of steroid use as a reason for the wrestler killing his wife and son. In

August, the Associated Press (2007) reported that damage to Benoit's brain not only justified the amount of drugs he was taking, but also played a large role in his behavior.

Instead of jumping to the easy conclusions and promoting steroids as the reason for Benoit's behavior, newspapers reported more on the known facts, which led to a more neutral tone in their reports.

Hypothesis 2: It is expected that the media influences the public perception of professional wrestling.

Intercept surveys established that public perception of the professional wrestling industry is not influenced by the media. Over 80 percent of the 60 respondents claimed to have no opinion change toward the professional wrestling industry based on media reports.

Most respondents received their information through television, which has already been established as a medium that negatively portrays the professional wrestling industry. Over 60 percent of the total respondents, however, held a neutral opinion toward the industry, contrary to the negative manner in which television covered the Benoit incident.

The media's inability to influence stems from the respondent's previously held opinions of the industry. Though most respondents didn't deny the accuracy of the reports they received, they didn't find the Benoit incident to be a representation of the entire industry. Most people were also not caught off guard by the fact that there is performance-enhancing drug use in the professional wrestling industry.

If the media played any role in the formation of public opinion toward the professional wrestling industry, it would solely be in the reinforcement of previous-held opinions.

General Findings

The coverage of professional wrestling observed in the content analysis prior to the Chris Benoit double murder-suicide was predominately positive.

WrestleMania 23 took place prior to the Benoit incident and played a large in gaining positive attention for the professional wrestling industry. One of *The New York Times*'s positive articles revolved around WrestleMania 23 and the fact that it drew a large international audience while taking place at Ford Field in Detroit, Mich. *The Miami Herald*, who has a regular wrestling columnist, also gave WrestleMania and its many weekend festivities positive attention.

The Miami Herald's regular wrestling columnist, Jim Varsallone, wrote in a mostly positive fashion throughout many of his stories – pre- and post-Benoit.

Varsallone's presence in *The Miami Herald* also played a large role in all wrestling stories appearing in the sports section compared appearing through various sections like in *The New York Times*, which has several different writers publishing stories about professional wrestling.

Further Research

Further research is necessary to better understand the affects Chris Benoit's double murder-suicide (or any wrestling crisis, for that matter) had on the image of the professional wrestling industry.

Conducting this same study on a larger scale would be highly beneficial. On a national level, there would be a greater set of results outside the southern New Jersey market.

There should also be more focused research on the different media. An in-depth analysis of television coverage compared to newspaper coverage would help distinguish the types of information viewers and readers receive. Research in this study showed great differences in the two media. According to The American Society of Newspaper Editors (1999), newspapers are viewed as a more credible source. Television, however, was the predominant information center for the respondents in the intercept study by a large margin. As a result, based on immediacy, people turn to a “less” credible source of information.

Research on the Internet should also be conducted. Professional wrestling has a large presence on the Internet, and many sites are dedicated solely to the news and opinions of the industry. Sites such as WrestlingObserver.com, PWInsider.com and 411mania.com not only have a high level of professional wrestling coverage, but also have a more targeted market of wrestling fans. Though fans are more likely to view the industry in a positive fashion, a content analysis of message boards and other forums may reveal more cynical attitudes.

Conclusion

The professional wrestling world received a shock on June 25, 2007, when one of the industry’s most celebrated veterans killed his wife and son before taking his own life. Professional wrestling had dealt with premature death before, but coming as a result of a

double murder-suicide was something new. As a result, an industry rarely given much attention in the news was open for immediate scrutiny of its internal operations.

Professional wrestling received a reprieve by gaining mostly neutral coverage in the newspapers. And even though television coverage was predominantly negative, public perception of the industry was not affected and remained largely neutral.

But now under a larger microscope, professional wrestling can no longer attempt to hide from the press. Instead, it must be proactive in case another crisis hits the industry. It must follow the lead of the NBA and NHL with an open stance toward media coverage. Learning from the MLB's new approach toward the press, which is to keep it up-to-date and informed on progress within the organization, will also lead to better representation in media coverage and among the public.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, M. (2002). Fifty Million Viewers Can't Be Wrong: Professional Wrestling, Sports-Entertainment, and Mimesis. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 19, 47-66. Retrieved Dec. 5, 2007.
- Beekman, S. (2006). *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Benoit Said to Have Disorder. (2007, Aug. 21). *The New York Times*. Retrieved Apr. 1, 2008, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/21/sports/othersports/21sportsbriefsBenoit.html?ex=1345348800&en=7d9c1e6d9613847e&ei=5088&partne>.
- Collins, J., Hylton, H., & Tynan, W. (1998). Lords of the ring. *time*, 151(25), 66-68. Retrieved Dec. 4, 2007, from the Academic Search Premier database.
- Craddock, J., Fischer, R., & Keith, S. (2001). *The Buzz on Professional Wrestling*. New York: Lebhar-Friedman Books.
- Eggerton, J. (2005, November 10). *Survey Says: Noncom News Most Trusted*. Retrieved November 15, 2007, from <http://www.broadcastingcable.com/article/CA6282871.html>.
- Fortunato, J. (2000). Public Relations Strategies For Creating Mass Media Content: A Case Study of the National Basketball Association. *Public Relations Review*, 26(4), 481-497. Retrieved Jan. 15, 2008.
- Johnson, S., McCoy, H., Muchnick, I., & Oliver, G. (2007). *Benoit: Wrestling with the Horror That Destroyed a Family and Crippled a Sport*. Toronto: ECW Press.

- Mazer, S. (1990). The Doggie Doggie World of Professional Wrestling. *The Drama Review*, 34(4), 96-122. Retrieved Dec. 4, 2007, from the JStor database.
- Media Control and the Influence of Public Discourse*. (2007). Retrieved Feb. 20, 2008, from <http://world-information.org/wio/infostructure/100437611734/100438658438>.
- Messner, M., Dunbar, M., & Hunt, D. (2000). The Televised Sports Manhood Formula. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 24(4), 380-394. Retrieved Dec. 10, 2007.
- Pabari, A. (2007, November 11). *411mania.com: Wrestling - CNN Edits Cena Interview In Documentary*. Retrieved November 12, 2007, from <http://www.411mania.com/wrestling/news/63155/CNN-Edits-Cena-Interview-In-Documentary.htm>.
- Pratten, J. (2003). Professional Wrestling - Multi-million Pound Soap Opera of Sports Entertainment. *Management Research News*, 26(5), 32-43. Retrieved Dec. 3, 2007, from the ABI/INFORM Global database.
- Shaikin, B. (2008, Mar. 28). *Baseball fans ready to declare end of steroid era*. Retrieved Apr. 4, 2008, from <http://www.latimes.com/sports/baseball/mlb/>.
- Smith, M. (2007, June 29). *Do Reports Give WWE a Bum Rap?*. Retrieved Oct. 15, 2007, from sports.aol.com/fanhouse.
- Soulliere, D. (2006). Wrestling with Masculinity: Messages About Manhood in the WWE. *Sex Roles*, 55, 1-11. Retrieved Dec. 11, 2007.
- Swartz, J. (2007, November 18). *Doping still an issue in wrestling*. Retrieved November 27, 2007, from http://www.usatoday.com/sports/2007-11-18-drugs-wrestling-cover_N.htm.

Tamborini, R., Skalski, P., Lachlan, K., Westerman, D., Davis, J., & Smith, S. (2005).

The Raw Nature of Televised Professional Wrestling: Is the Violence a Cause for Concern?. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 49(2), 202-220. Retrieved Dec. 4, 2007.

Urban, C. (1999, Aug. 6). *ASNE - (EXTRA) Examining Our Credibility: Perspectives of the Public and the Press*. Retrieved Oct. 15, 2007, from

<http://www.asne.org/kiosk/reports/99reports/1999examiningourcredibility/>.

WWE Shocked At Latest Developments In Benoit Tragedy, Concerned By Sensationalistic

Reporting. (2007, June 26). Retrieved Oct. 20, 2007, from

http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2007/2007_06_26.jsp.

Sport - Definitions from Dictionary.com. (2006). Retrieved Dec. 10, 2007, from

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sport>.

APPENDIX

Media Influence on Public Opinion of Professional Wrestling Survey

1) Are you a fan of professional wrestling?

☐ Yes ☐ No

1a) If yes, since what year?

1b) If no, why not?

2) Are you aware of the incident in June of 2007 when a professional wrestler, Chris Benoit, was found dead at his home with his wife and child and was presumed by officials to have committed a double-murder suicide?

☐ Yes ☐ No

2a) If yes, where did you find your information?

☐ Television ☐ Radio ☐ Newspapers ☐ Internet ☐ Other

3) Did you find media accounts of the incident believable?

☐ Yes ☐ No

4) How did the media accounts of the incident make you feel toward professional wrestling at the time?

☐ Positive ☐ Neutral ☐ Negative

4a) Explain.

5) Would you say that your perception of professional wrestling was changed or was not changed as a result of the information you received from the media?

- ☐ Changed ☐ Not changed

5a) Explain.

6) How do you feel about professional wrestling now?

- ☐ Positive ☐ Neutral ☐ Negative

6a) Explain.

Demographics

7) Sex

- ☐ Male ☐ Female

8) Age

- ☐ 18-24 ☐ 25-34 ☐ 35-49 ☐ 50+

9) Annual Household Income

- ☐ student, not employed
☐ 10,000-50,000
☐ 50,001-75,000
☐ 75,001-100,000
☐ 100,001+
☐ Other _____

10) Number of children (under 18) living in household

- ☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5+

Thank you very much for your participation in this research study. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.

