The power of the message: a study of media influence on the development of public opinion

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THE POWER OF THE MESSAGE:
A STUDY OF MEDIA INFLUENCE ON THE
DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC OPINION

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ABSTRACT

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THE POWER OF THE MESSAGE: A STUDY OF MEDIA INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC OPINION
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The influential power that media channels have directly affects the development of public opinion when it comes to the National Football League, its players and subsequent on or off the field incidents.

The purpose of this study was to show how public opinion of the NFL is driven by different demographic information and by how fans get their news concerning the NFL and its subsequent adverse news. This study will attempt to show how age and media source can affect the development of public opinion, how public opinion is formed and potential variables that may influence opinion formation.

The researcher performed a non-scientific pen and paper survey of fifty individual males in the southern New Jersey area to determine their attitudes and opinions. Respondents were asked simple demographic and open ended questions and then asked the same questions again after providing an addendum of facts concerning each case in the survey. Responses to surveys were calculated using Microsoft Excel charting software and then displayed by demographic age group.

Resulting data indicates that media content or influence has little to no affect on the development of public opinion about the NFL, its teams or its players.
“The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. ...We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of.” – Edward Bernays

A deep debt of gratitude goes to Professor Joseph Basso who helped me finish this daunting task…To my co-workers and friends who taught me to level my head in order to shoulder the load…and my most profound thanks to Dr. Donald Bagin, who while both on good days and bad always took time to address my concerns and quiet my frustrations.

Thank you all
Faith – Hope – Sacrifice
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Chapter I

Introduction

Even before the 2005 NFL football season began, the country was awash with discussions about a player we have come to know informally as T.O. The stories of his antics and his insatiable appetite for the media spotlight leave fans of the NFL wondering whether there is anything that can be done to control or punish players who step beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior.

The National Football League is one of the largest grossing business endeavors in the United States. Today, around $6 billion a year are generated from NFL football games and venues.¹ The success of the NFL is driven by its popularity with fans and the image that it presents. Recent times have seen an upward spiraling, and almost chaotic, trend in player-related incidents and legal troubles. These incidents have made many fans upset at the NFL for its lack of control and subsequent negative image.

Public relations practitioners for the NFL, individual teams and the Associated Press all play a role in branding the NFL's image. Methods of reporting these negative occurrences from each team's public relations department have an effect on how fans perceive the NFL. This effect is known as the model for public opinion formation. When public relations practitioners attempt to form public opinion, we take into account the knowledge that our fan-base has on a given issue, the feelings or attitudes of the public and the actions or behaviors that are a result of fans acting on their attitudes.

Not everyone gets news from the same source. New technologies such as internet, digital television, satellite radio, and older mediums such as radio, and print continually feed information to the public. These new and older methods of communication are as influential toward opinion formation as the message itself. Older fans, which may get their information from radio or newspapers, are dumbfounded by the state that professional football is in, while the younger fans (mostly internet and web casting news) love the sport for its marquee players and violent content.

Statement of the Problem

Due to recent off-the-field incidents involving National Football League players, the image of the NFL and fan acceptance has diminished. Information about bad news or controversial issues with players is the driving force behind the public formation of opinion concerning the NFL and its image of a family sport and pastime for the whole family. Fan opinions can directly affect the bottom line of a company or business because of attitudes becoming action. If fans are disappointed in the NFL, then they may stay away from going to games or buying team apparel.

Procedure

To provide material and issues for relevant research, the researcher will conduct a content analysis of three topics of controversy when concerned with NFL players. The first of the issues will be a contract dispute case. This will focus on Terrell Owens, an all-pro wide receiver for the Philadelphia Eagles. The second case will be a drug abuse or steroid problem. This will concentrate on running back Jamal Lewis, an all-pro athlete for the NFL who was involved with illegal narcotics. The third issue will be a capital crime,
murder. NFL fans witnesses this case in 1999 in the case of Carolina Panthers star Rae Carruth.

These case studies will serve as points of discussion for a framing study while conducting intercept surveys of stratified randomly selected groups of ten people that will provide information on attitudes and behaviors concerning issues such as the case studies mentioned above. The researcher will conduct random intercept surveys that will question people ranging from teenagers to retired individuals who are fans of the NFL and its brand of entertainment.

**Purpose of the study**

The researcher will attempt to show how public opinion of the NFL is driven by different demographic information and by how fans get their news concerning the NFL and its subsequent adverse news. This study will attempt to show how age and media source can affect the development of public opinion, how public opinion is formed and potential variables that may influence opinion formation.

**Hypothesis and Research Questions**

H1 --- The researcher hypothesizes that opinion formation, first and foremost, is influenced by the content of the message itself.

H2 --- Opinion formation is influenced by latent attitudes of the fans themselves. These latent attitudes or cognitive behaviors are the result of experiences or indoctrinated beliefs that people possess. These attitudes are deeply seated in the convictions of each fan and are the starting point for the formation of public and individual opinion making.
H3 --- The age of the person or public under study directly affects the opinions made by that person or persons. Younger fans admire the NFL for its star players and the action on the field while older fans rely greatly on precedents and standards established with their generation.

H4 --- The media source that fans receive the majority of their news and information from will influence public opinion formation. Different media sources provide information in different manners.

Assumptions

- The researcher assumes that media and public relations are fair and non-judgmental in their reporting of controversies and incidents involving the NFL or individual teams.
- The researcher assumes that the respondents of the intercept survey are passionate NFL fans.
- The researcher assumes that the respondents of the intercept survey have beliefs and thoughts that cannot be swayed by outside interference.
- The researcher assumes that latent attitudes and cognitive behaviors are the reasons for personal opinion formation and conviction.
- The researcher assumes that NFL fans receive their sporting news only from the sources listed in question three.
Limitations

The researcher will survey high school students, college students at Rowan University and non-college students to determine their perceptions of professional football before and after being exposed to three real-life case studies.

Time will be a limitation in performing research and data collection as the width and breadth of this study is limited to a small geographic area and cannot measure the entire universe.

Funding will be an issue when conducting this study because the researcher is not a member of an accredited research company and is performing data collection and research with limited funds. Incentives and added bonuses for participation are not feasible for this study.

Significance of the Study

The researcher hopes to show that how the fans receive their news and in what form dictate how the fans perceive the image and reputation of the NFL and its players. This researcher will attempt to show how the media and public relations departments of each team effect changes in fan perceptions by the way they report news from the NFL and each team. Also, we hope to show that differences in age effect how fans approve or disapprove of how the NFL conducts itself and how it covers controversial incidents.
**Definition of Terms**

**NFL** – The National Football League; a collection of thirty-two teams that comprise two conferences [American Football Conference and National Football Conference] with eight divisions among them.

**Public Opinion** – The process by which public relations professionals inform and persuade their audiences into believing and acting upon their message.

**Media** – News sources such as television, radio, newspapers, internet and others that provide fans with information about their favorite team or teams.

**Public relations** – The management of an organization’s communication and its publics.

**Content Analysis** – Discovery of information about a series of items through a systematic analysis resulting in factual statements, including frequencies and percentages of each item against selected categories or against the whole.

**Peer Pressure** - Pressure from one’s peers to behave in a manner similar or acceptable to them. The social influence a peer group exerts on its individual members, as each member attempts to conform to the expectations of the group.

**Latent Attitudes** – Unexpressed attitudes strong enough to erupt into behavior at the instigation of a triggering incident, event or message.
Social Psychology – It is the science that studies individual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in settings where other people are present (or merely implied or imagined).

Intercept Survey - The process of randomly selecting respondents and questioning individuals for survey research that meet pre-determined criteria for age selection.
Chapter II

Review of the Literature

The researcher reviewed a number of related articles, educational journals and textbooks to better understand the thesis topic of public opinion. Upon the conclusion of the literary review, four avenues of study were determined:

- Public Opinion and how it is understood, constructed and studied.
- The psychological and sociological aspect of public opinion formation
- The ethical pitfalls to public opinion formation and research
- Case studies of negative issues to determine public mass sentiment

The researcher used three types of research engines or methods to perform the literary review for this thesis. These methods were:

- Electronic databases provided by the Rowan University Campbell Library online. These databases include ABI/INFORM Global, EBSCOhost research databases, and psycARTICLES.
- Various university textbooks and their corresponding bibliographies
- Internet search engines such as www.google.com and www.ask.com
Examining the Elements of Public Opinion

To accurately understand public opinion, consumers must first understand how information is passed and how communication occurs between sender (the author of the message) and the receiver (the target public). Communication models like the Shannon/Weaver Mechanistic Model or Lasswell’s Communication Process describe the function of communication between sender and receiver in detail, but really boil down to a simple five-step understanding of the process.

The author of the message is the first function of communication. Any message intended for an audience must be initiated by the sender. The sender, in this case, is the NFL and its representatives are the media or public relations staffs of each team or the league as a whole. To reach the right people, the sender must determine what or whom his or her target audience may be. In the second step of the communication process, the sender identifies its target audiences. The NFL would look at the demographics of its fan base and determine who they are trying to reach. The third step is to devise the message that the sender wishes to deliver. Once the public relations practitioner studies the situation, fully understanding his/her audience’s predispositions, feelings and past behaviors, the message is packaged for its intended target audience. The message the sender wishes to deliver cannot reach its audience unless a method of delivery is chosen, which leads us to our fourth step of choosing our communication channel.

Since the NFL is communicated world-wide through various methods of communication, it is important to decide which channel is the most effective in reaching the intended audience. Television, radio and internet are still the dominant methods of communication. However, newspapers, wires and phone also provide important

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Don Bagin and Anthony Fulginiti; 2005; pg. 39-40
information sources. The fifth step is, of course, seeing what effect a message has on a target audience. Was the message received and understood by the audience? Did the message invoke a response or behavior that we intend to happen or not intend to happen? If a result is not seen then one or more parts of our communications process did not work or were not performed properly. If the public relations practitioner holds true to the steps of the communication process, then public relations practitioners should ultimately see a response, negatively or positively, to our message from our target audience.

Now that public relations researchers have seen how the communication process works, they will look at opinion formation. In breaking down the term public opinion, we see that the book Practical Public Relations (Fulginiti and Bagin, 2005) defines opinion as the outward expression of an attitude. It is the outward and observable act of a person, whether it is a word, physical expression, gesture or action. In essence, opinion is a behavior. It is what the public does according to what they know or think about a particular subject. Since opinion is the behavior of a public or individual, the researcher will show that information and attitude are keys to developing that behavior.

Public relations practitioners can achieve three effects in the public they are observing. First is what the person or persons know about a situation. Since communicators are trying to examine public opinion of the NFL concerning negative news, we akin this to how much information fans have as concerned to a player’s act of violence, trouble with the law or how he portrays himself in the media. Information is the sum of knowledge that a person, concerned with a particular issue, wants to have. How much do the fans know about player X’s drug problems or his contract negotiation. Second is how a person feels about the issue or information that they receive. The attitude

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3 Practical Public Relations: theories & practices that make a difference
Don Bagin and Anthony Fulginiti; 2005; pg. 41
a person has is simply the predisposition to act. How does a fan feel about a player who commits an act of violence on his spouse or another human being away from the football field? What are his or her concerns when they see a star athlete arrested for drug possession, and does this make the fan want to act on his or her feelings?

The information a person receives coupled with how the public under study feels about the news and information they receive develops an opinion about the issue. Information consumers see that opinion is the sum of how much information a person possesses and the attitude or feelings of that person that makes them what to do something about it.

\[ \text{Information} + \text{compelling feelings} = \text{Behavior (opinions)} \]

Dr. Robert Kendall of the University of Florida developed a model of public opinion formation that gives the researcher insight into how public opinions are formed and what role the public relations practitioner plays in opinion formation. This model is simply referred to as the “Cracked-Egg Model” and it describes the seven stages of opinion formation.4

1. Stage one in the Cracked Egg model is Mass sentiment. Patrick Jackson, the late public relations counselor and theorist, described mass sentiment as Latent Attitude. Latent attitudes are feelings or an attitude of the public that lie unexpressed in the human subconscious until an important event or issue triggers these attitudes and makes the publics express them.

2. Stage two is the incident or issue associated with opinion formation. Latent attitudes are activated by incidents and issues related to the mass sentiment held by the public. Incidents in the NFL like felony drug possession or physical battery of another

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4 Practical Public Relations: theories & practices that make a difference
Don Bagin and Anthony Fulginiti; 2005; pg. 45-46
human being are issues that unlock latent attitudes about drugs or violence in the NFL fan base to the point of the public acting out or voicing their opinion.

3. Stage three is where pro and con publics form around the issues. As the issue comes to light, publics take sides based on the mass sentiment they possessed that relates to the incident. NFL fans will pick sides as to how they feel about their favorite player or team and their involvement in the incident at hand. Some will form a Pro opinion to the issue while others will form Con opinions, but both stem from the latent attitudes people carry.

4. Stage four happens when, after the publics have learned about the incident or issue and have formed a pro or con opinion on the incident, a debate on the issue occurs. Debates can happen among large groups or within a small group of people and offer information on each positions stance on the incident or issue. The result of debate is a public forming a more clear and informed position on a topic, a change of position on an issue or even a completely new stance.

5. Stage five of public opinion formation is simply time. Once a debate has occurred on an incident or issue, time is needed for information and arguments from that debate to settle in the minds of the publics. Debates are usually emotionally “heated” and given enough time after the debate, a public can calmly dissect arguments and process information. Be weary of results from a debate shortly after it has ended because public opinion is in constant change. Public Relations practitioners must allow for a certain amount of time to pass so that arguments and information can be absorbed in the minds of the public.

6. Stage six is the formation of a public opinion. Professor Anthony Fulginiti and Professor Don Bagin’s book, Practical Public Relations (2005), states that, “public
opinion is the accumulation of the individual opinion, on an important issue, in public debate, affecting the lives of a public.”5 This definition of public opinion shows the concise understanding of how public opinion is formed through the first five stages of public opinion formation.

7. Stage seven is the social action of the public to effect society’s behavior based on public opinion. When public opinion is achieved, groups of publics will act on their beliefs and new-found opinions to direct change in society. Any public concerned with negative issues in the NFL could form an opinion that is agreeable with other sympathetic publics, join together and propose new rules or guidelines that help remedy the issue or incident that has raised public opinion. The actions that a public takes will, in turn, influence latent attitudes or mass sentiment or the public and start a new cycle of the public opinion formation model when a similar issue occurs again.

**Latent Attitudes and Cognitive Behaviors**

Knowing the steps to public opinion formation is only the beginning when trying to develop public opinion on an issue or incident. The base for all public opinion research is the understanding of public mass sentiment. “The late public relations counselor and theorist, Patrick Jackson, called this quiet inward feeling latent attitude. At any time, publics harbor latent attitudes about issues.”6 These attitudes reside in a dormant state until an issue or incident in public interest ignites them and then publics act upon them. Latent attitudes can be developed by any number of issues that a person or public have strong feeling toward. These feeling can be developed personally from family

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5 Practical Public Relations: theories & practices that make a difference
Don Bagin and Anthony Fulginiti; 2005; pg. 46
6 Practical Public Relations: theories & practices that make a difference
Don Bagin and Anthony Fulginiti, 2005, pg. 45
indoctrination of ethics and beliefs, or through groups such as political or religious organizations.

When developing true public opinion, groups of publics are great places to focus your research on and mold your message to. Individual people in a target public are more difficult to research than pros and cons groups that feed off each other to develop a common belief. Edward Bernays states that “because man is by nature gregarious he feels himself to be a member of a herd, even when he is alone in his room with the curtains drawn. His mind retains the patterns which have been stamped on it by the group influences.”

A popular psychological term called group think reaffirms Bernays stance saying that a person is influenced greatly by the peer group that he or she is involved with. However, Bernays discusses how individuals do not actually need to be gathered together to be influenced. Naturally, if communicators can influence and develop the latent attitudes of one person, that man or woman will bring those attitudes back to the group in which they congregate. Bagin and Fulginiti (2005) point out that “members of a group will often do something for the group they won’t do for themselves. Persuading leaders of defined groups to go with the proposal generally inspires group members to follow.”

Public relations practitioners can use latent attitudes when they match objectives to public mass sentiment. Research can show a PR counselor what types of latent attitudes its target publics possess and how deeply seated these feeling are. Strong latent attitudes can be a valuable asset to public opinion formation, but they can also be just as dangerous.

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7 Propaganda; Edward Bernays 1928, pg. 73
8 Practical Public Relations: theories & practices that make a difference
   Don Bagin and Anthony Fulginiti; 2005; pg. 57
Ethics of Public Opinion Formation

More and more communicators can see how the court of public opinion is influencing the publics’ perception toward news events. The difficulty in developing mass public opinion is doing so while satisfying all parties involved. As shown in the cracked-egg model, pro and con publics form after an incident or issue. When reporting information or news, the media must do so in an ethical manner that does not sway mass public opinion one way or the other. Though, sometimes communicators do see biased media reporting favoring one side over the other and, in essence, ignore the boundaries or ethical conduct.

Ron Pearson of Mount Saint Vincent University in Canada introduces the idea of ethic relativism in his journal article Beyond Ethical relativism in Public Relations: Coorientation, Rules, and the Idea of Communication Symmetry. “Ethical relativism is the view that objective moral standards are unknowable or do not exist, and that, as a result, no way exists to mediate among competing interests.”9 This definition is the most commonly held idea among public relations practitioners. Simply put, there is no known way to satisfy both sides of a particular issue without offending one side or the other. Ryan and Martinson (1984) suggested that, “Although some scholars have attempted to establish moral anchors in public relations…widespread agreement on substantive principles have not yet been achieved…if public relations has adopted any underlying principle, it is possibly the subjectivism (or individual relativism) theory that each individual must establish his or her own moral base lines.” 10

9 Public Relations Research Annual; Vol. 1; Beyond Ethical Relativism in Public Relations: Coorientation, Rules, and the Idea of Communication Symmetry; Ron Pearson; 1989; pg. 67-70
10 Public Relations Research Annual; Vol. 1; Beyond Ethical Relativism in Public Relations: Coorientation, Rules, and the Idea of Communication Symmetry; Ron Pearson; 1989; pg. 68
While it is difficult to understand what moral and ethical principles public relations must adhere to when developing public opinion, it might be more beneficial to understand the opposition between competing interests by asking what types of communication systems can most likely mediate all publics involved. There are two types of communication that occur in public relations; monologue and dialogue. Monologue refers to the one-way asymmetric communication from sender to receiver. Dialogue refers to the two-way symmetric communication between sender and receiver. Johannesen (1974) proposed that dialogue is intimately connected to such notions as honesty, concern for audience, genuineness, open-mindedness, empathy, lack of pretense, non-manipulative intent, and encouragement of free expression. In contrast, monologue – one-way asymmetric communication – is characterized by deception, exploitation, dogmatism, insincerity, pretense, coercion, distrust and self-defensiveness.

No more present is this idea that with the theory of two-step flow communication put forth by Katz and Lazarsfeld.11 When media and public relations use a direct one-way flow of information dissemination, the public feels a sense of distrust, insincerity and distrust. Most methods of information delivery use this type of communication. Radio, television and newspapers deliver information gathered from source to the public without feedback. The two-step flow theory shows that publics are more confident with media and public relations when an influential endorses the message or picks up on mass sentiment and relays that sentiment back to media source. Two-way symmetric communication makes publics feel more at ease with the information that has been passed to them.

11 Practical Public Relations: theories & practices that make a difference Don Bagin and Anthony Fulginiti; 2005; pg. 47
Another way to clear up the ethical responsibilities in developing public opinion is to look at the co-orientation theory. The coorientation theory (Newcomb, 1953) asks questions about the mutual orientation of two individuals or organizations to some object or idea, such as communication rules. In reference to this study, our object or idea is the perception of how media should report negative news concerning the NFL. The coorientation theory looks for the level of similarity or congruence that each communicator perceives that the other has with his or her beliefs or understanding. Scheff (1967) points to four levels of coorientation between communicators:

1. Communicators can have similar understandings of communication rules and accurately perceive that this is the case. This is called Monolithic Consensus.

2. Communicators can have similar understandings of the rules but perceive that they do not. This is called Pluralistic Ignorance.

3. They can have dissimilar understandings of what the communication rules are, and accurately perceive that this is the case. This is called dissensus.

4. Communicators can have dissimilar understanding of the rules but believe they do not. This is referred to as False Consensus.  

A study by Carter (1958) gives us insight to how coorientation works. He found that a study of physicians and newspaper reporters yielded high agreement between both parties as to the relative importance of journalistic value in stories reporting science news. Both of the groups agreed that accuracy was most important, followed by reader interest, usefulness, prompt publication and completeness. While both groups could agree on the importance of communication rules, reporters thought physicians would be more

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12 Public Relations Research Annual; Vol. 1; Beyond Ethical Relativism in Public Relations: Coorientation, Rules, and the Idea of Communication Symmetry; Ron Pearson; 1989; pg. 77-78.
like them than physicians thought reporters would be like them. This is an example of Scheff's pluralistic ignorance. Because physicians thought that reporters used different communication rules than the reporters actually used, physicians might look upon interviews and news releases insincerely and with apprehension. We can accurately substitute our own communicators into this study to understand public and media cooration when it comes to media reporting of NFL news. Both the public and the media can have similar ideas as to the communication rules for reporting these stories, but either the media or public could perceive that the other does not adhere to these rules. While monolithic consensus is relatively rare in its occurrence, it is possible to develop this consensus by using a two-way, symmetric communication system to gather public feedback to news stories.

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13 Public Relations Research Annual; Vol.1; Beyond Ethical Relativism in Public Relations: Coorientation, Rules, and the Idea of Communication Symmetry; Ron Pearson; 1989; pg. 79.
Chapter III

Research Design

The researcher used quantitative research methods such as intercept surveys combined with a quantitative research of case studies of negative events or stories concerning the NFL to determine what effect media influence and age have on public opinion of the NFL. The target audiences were broken into five age-based categories.

A stratified population representing the whole universe was selected because of limitations to research. The researcher was constrained by time and money to do a universal study of all males, in which case the researcher used males from southern New Jersey area as representatives of the whole universe. Each age group consisted of ten survey respondents that fell into the specified age group.

Each person surveyed in all five groups was asked a series of open and closed-ended questions to determine what effect media influence and age had on the perceptions and opinions of NFL fans.

Instruments

Primary Quantitative Research

To coincide with the focus groups, the researcher did a content analysis of three case studies concerning negative news in the NFL. The three case studies were placed in ranking order of least offensive to most offensive problem. The subjects and case study are listed in order of minor to major offenses below:
1. Contact Disputes – Terrell Owens, Philadelphia Eagles
2. Drug offenses – Jamal Lewis, Baltimore Ravens
3. Murder/violence – Rae Carruth, Carolina Panthers

For each case study, the researcher reviewed news releases from the city where the team is located and the local news releases in the south New Jersey and Philadelphia area.

Secondary Quantitative Research

For the purpose of this study, the researcher used intercept surveys as a first tier research technique. A stratified population was selected based on time and monetary constraints. In this case, males representing the Southern NJ area constituted the demographic and stratified section of the universe under study. Five age groups were asked the same open and closed-ended questions. Each group was categorized as follows:

1. ages 13-17 = high school students
2. ages 18-21 = college students
3. ages 22-30 = young professionals
4. ages 31-40 = thirty-somethings
5. ages 40+ = elder generation

Prior to actually conducting the intercept survey, a pre-test was performed to determine the legibility and readability of the survey instrument. The researcher determined that the questions asked in the intercept survey were understandable and thus proceeded with handing out the survey instrument.
Pilot Instrument

The researcher pre-tested the proposed method of questioning on single individuals that represented each age demographic. These individuals were not included as members of the intercept surveys respondents and the goal of the pre-test was to determine if the line of questioning was understandable and valid.

Procedures

In deciding that the southern New Jersey area would be representative of the whole universe, the researcher went about collecting his intercept survey participants in a random manner. Male athletes representing the thirteen to seventeen year old age group were selected from the Glassboro High School with the help of several athletic coaches and administrative staff from the high school. The researcher used male athletes from Rowan University to represent the eighteen to twenty one aged demographic. The researcher then asked several male graduate students of Rowan University to represent the twenty two to thirty year old group. The researcher found his representatives for the age thirty one to forty demographic by asking male teachers and employees of Rowan University to partake in the study. The elder demographic of forty plus was selected by frequenting senior citizens groups and Glassboro town meetings, where the researcher asked individuals to be participants.

Framing Studies

The first part of the intercept survey was designed to collect demographic data and personal opinions concerning the NFL, media source and ethical media reporting through use of standardized questions, open and closed-ended questions scaled
answer questions. The second part of the survey was designed by the researcher to judge initial opinion and feeling concerning the three case studies involving the NFL and its players. The third part of the survey was designed by the researcher to determine opinions and feelings about each case study after providing factual background information on each case study.

Case Studies

For the purpose of bolstering research productivity, the author of this study will be using a case study approach to the focus panel research. Three case studies will be used to gauge public perception or opinion toward each negative news case concerning the NFL. It is the hope of the researcher that because each of the case studies used ranges in level of severity, we will be able to find and probe latent behaviors toward such incidents. The first level of severity will be akin to disruptive athletes or athletes whose antics and verbal attacks bring a team more negative exposure than positive. The second level of severity will deal with drug or narcotic convictions or involvement. More athletes are being arrested for possession and usage of drugs such as marijuana and steroids in professional sports than ever before, and as such, have become a hot topic among NFL fans. The third level of severity will focus on crimes against human beings or murder. In 1999, Rae Carruth was involved in the planned murder of his then pregnant girlfriend and subsequent media coverage portrayed the NFL through less than rose-colored glasses.

Level One – Terrell Owens, WR Philadelphia Eagles

Terrell Owens is a wide receiver for the NFL franchise Philadelphia Eagles in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Even before his arrival in Philadelphia, Terrell Owens had a

\[14\] A Timeline of Terrell Owens’ Antics; James Alder; 2005; http://football.about.com/od/nflnews/a/owenstimeline.htm?terms=Terrell+Owens
very eventful past with his former team, the San Francisco 49ers. Terrell is considered as one of the best wide receivers in professional football today, but his actions on the field have been clouded by his actions and words off the field. Here are just a few of the incidents that Terrell Owens has gotten himself into in the past five years:

2001 – After blowing a 19-point lead against Chicago in a loss, Terrell Owens accused 49er’s head coach Steve Mariucci of protecting his good friend Dick Jauron, head coach of the Chicago Bears.

2002 – In a Monday Night Football contest in Seattle, Owens pulled a marker out of his sock after catching a touchdown pass. He then autographed the ball and gave the ball to his financial adviser sitting in an end zone luxury suite rented by Shawn Springs, the cornerback Owens had just beaten on the scoring play.

2004 – Terrell Owens agent failed to meet the free agency deadline in March, making him ineligible to become a free agent. Because the 49er’s retained the rights to Owens, he was traded to the Baltimore Ravens, but Terrell Owens refused to report to his new team. Instead, Owens filled a grievance with the players union claiming he had the right to be a free agent and go to whatever team his chose. After several negotiations, Owens was eventually traded to Philadelphia and signed a 7-year deal worth $49 million dollars against the advice of the players union.

2005 – After a stellar first season with the Eagles, Owens hires super-agent Drew Rosenhaus and announces that he is not happy with his contract and was going to renegotiate with the Eagles. Owens tells CNBC that, despite his $7.5 million in earnings the previous season, he needed a new contract to “feed his family.”
2005 – Owens shows up for pre-season camp with a bad attitude, not acknowledging reporters, or speaking to teammates. After a confrontation with head coach Andy Reid, Owens is suspended from camp for one week.

2005 – During an interview for ESPN, Owens takes shots at the Eagles franchise for not publicly recognizing his 100th career touchdown catch. During the interview he also said that the Eagles showed a “lack of class.” Owens also stated that the Eagles might be better off with Packers quarterback Brett Favre instead of Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb.

After months of verbal assaults toward the Eagles franchise, the quarterback and the coach, the Philadelphia Eagles announced in November that the team was suspending the beleaguered wide receiver indefinitely, meaning that Terrell Owens would not play football again until the 2006 season. Some people believe that Owens had a right to renegotiate his contract. His antics on the field are often defended as the on-field persona of an entertainer. Yet others see Owens as nothing more than a spoiled brat.

**Level Two – Jamal Lewis, RB Baltimore Ravens**

Jamal Lewis is a running back for the Baltimore Ravens of the National Football League. In 2003-2004, Jamal Lewis became a hero in the eyes of Baltimore and NFL fans everywhere when he posted the second highest rushing total in NFL history with 2,066 yards gained for the season, second only to NFL legend Eric Dickerson’s record of 2,105 yards. He became only the fifth player in NFL history to break the 2,000 yard barrier in a single season. At the conclusion of the season, Jamal Lewis was named Associated Press NFL offensive player of the year.

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15 *Lewis Expected to Turn Himself in Thursday;* Associated Press; Feb. 26, 2004; www.espn.go.com
Shortly after the season, news broke that the federal government was filing federal drug trafficking charges against the Ravens star running back. Lewis was charged with conspiring to possess with the intent to distribute five kilograms of cocaine and using a cell phone in the commission of the first count. The alleged incident took place when Lewis tried to help a childhood friend buy cocaine in the summer of 2000. Prosecutors alleged that the cocaine buy was discussed by cell phone and during a restaurant conversation in the summer of 2000 involving Lewis, a boyhood friend and a woman who turned out to be a police informant.

Defense attorneys claim that the informants had set up Lewis and that the charges were “trumped up to exaggerate what actually happened” to help the informant avoid jail time. Lewis’s attorneys admit that Lewis was at the restaurant, but not for the reasons alleged in the indictment. The defense team accused authorities of creating a crime when none had taken place. Jamal Lewis had served a four-game suspension in 2001 for his second violation of the NFL’s substance and alcohol abuse policy. In keeping with its own policy, the NFL did not disclose the nature or details of the violation. As part of a plea bargain, Jamal Lewis pled guilty to a lesser charge and served four to six months in a Florida detention center during the summer of 2005, causing the Ravens star to miss mini-camp and part of the 2005 pre-season.

Level Three – Rae Carruth, WR Carolina Panthers

Rae Carruth, a wide receiver for the University of Colorado Buffalos, was drafted in the first round by the Carolina Panthers of the National Football League in 1997. During his three seasons in the NFL, Carruth had become a liability to the Panthers because of his injury problems. Rae Carruth dated many women during his career.

Profile: Rae Carruth; Charles Montaldo; 2005; http://crime.about.com/od/murder/p/raecarruth.htm
Financially, Carruth’s commitments began to exceed his income and he became more concerned with his future. While dealing with a paternity suit and increasing debt, he learned that a woman he frequently dated, Cherica Adams, was pregnant with his child. People and friends described Carruth and Adams’ relationship as a casual one. Even after he learned of the pregnancy he still continued to date other women.

On Nov. 15, 1999, Adams and Carruth met to see a movie. It was only the second date the two had been on since Carruth learned of the pregnancy. When the movie was over, they left in separate cars and Adams followed behind Carruth. Shortly after leaving the cinema, a car drove up along the driver side of Cherica Adam’s car and one of the occupants began to fire his gun directly at her. She suffered four gun shot wounds to the back, damaging vital organs. Adams was rushed to the hospital where doctors were able to save her unborn baby. Adams was able to give police her account of what had happened and told of how Carruth was there in the car in front of her and blocked her car from fleeing the scene. Shortly after she had provided investigators with her account, she succumbed to her wounds and died.

Carruth, who had posted a $3 million bail agreed to turn himself back into police custody in the event Adams or her child died. When Carruth had learned of Adams death, he fled to Tennessee where FBI agents found Carruth hiding in the trunk of a friend’s car. Police arrested Carruth and three other men who drove the car that pulled along side Ms. Adams and opened fire. The four had been initially charged with conspiracy to commit murder, attempted murder and shooting into an occupied vehicle. After Cherica Adams death, the charges where changed to first degree murder.

The three men in the shooting vehicle agreed to testify against Rae Carruth for decreased sentences. All three admitted that Carruth wanted Adams killed to avoid
having to pay child support and that Carruth was there blocking Adams car at the scene. The defense team argued that the shooting was a result of a botched drug deal that Carruth was going to finance but backed out of at the last moment. The trial took twenty-seven days with testimony from more than 70 witnesses. Without ever having taken the stand at his trial, Rae Carruth was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder, shooting into an occupied vehicle and using an instrument to destroy an unborn child. Carruth was sentenced to eighteen to twenty-four years in prison.

Data Analysis

After completion of the focus groups, the researcher took the transcribed notes and recorded material and conducted a qualitative analysis of each group member’s response to the case study questions. The researcher then formulated a common perception and opinion representative to each of the five groups concerning media source and age demographic.
Chapter IV

Results

Approximately 150 pen and paper surveys were distributed to various high schools, organizations, groups and college classes. Fifty surveys were returned usable. Five surveys returned were rejected based on the respondents’ answer that they were not a fan of the NFL. Three surveys were rejected based on unanswered or incomplete questions. The five age-based demographic groups consisted of ten survey responses each.

PART I: Demographics
Six questions were asked in the first part of the pen and paper survey and were designed to discover demographic information, personal attitudes and opinions about the media and the NFL.

Question 1: What is your age?

- a. 14-18 years = 10 respondents
- b. 19-21 years = 10 respondents
- c. 22-30 years = 10 respondents
- d. 31-40 years = 10 respondents
- e. 41+ years = 10 respondents

Question 2: Are you a fan of the National Football League?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. It is ok

The researcher used question two to qualify respondents. Respondents were eliminated from the study if they answered b. or no to question number two. Five surveys were rejected from the pool of respondents for this survey for answer b.
Question 3: What is the primary media source from which you get your sporting news? Rank order the following choices: (1) being where you get most of your news to (5), what you use the least.

a. Newspaper
b. Radio
c. Internet
d. Television
e. Other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-A: Ages 14-18

With respect to the 14-18 year old age group, television appears to be the primary media source used to receive sporting news, followed by internet, newspaper, radio and then other sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-B: Ages 19-21

With respect to the 19-21 year old age group, television appears to be the primary media source used to receive sporting news, followed by newspaper, internet, radio and then other sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
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<td>Internet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Television</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3-C: Ages 22-30

With respect to the 22-30 year old age group, television appears to be the primary media source used to receive sporting news, followed by internet, newspaper, radio and then other sources.
With respect to the 31-40 year old age group, television appears to be the primary media source used to receive sporting news, followed by internet, newspaper, radio and then other sources.

With respect to the 41+ year old age group, television and newspapers are equally used by respondents as the primary media source to receive sporting news, followed by radio, internet and then other sources.

**Question 4:** Do you believe media sources (TV, radio, internet, etc.) are ethical in their reporting of sporting news?
Sixty percent of males in the 14-18 year old category feel that the media does adhere to an ethical code of reporting while 40 percent feel that the media are only interested in increased readership through bias reporting.

A majority of males in the 19-21 year old age group – 90 percent – feel that the media do adhere to a set code of ethical conduct when reporting sporting news, while only 10 percent feel that the media were only concerned with printing controversial news.

Eighty percent of males representing the 22-30 year old demographic feel that the media do not follow ethical guidelines and report news based on their own opinion, while 10 percent believe the media do a very good job of reporting just the facts of the case.

Of the males representing the 31-40 year old demographic, one-half of respondents believe that the media do a good job in abiding to ethical standards while the remaining half believe the media to report only information that will either increase their audience or express their own opinion.

A ninety percent majority of the males ages 41+ believe that the media do not abide by any sort of ethical guideline when reporting on sporting news, stating that the goal of reporters is to increase ratings or sell a product.

Question 5: How do you feel the media portray NFL players in terms of their ethical behavior?

With respect to 14-18 year olds, 60 percent of this age demographic have no strong feelings either positively or negatively about ethical media responsibility when reporting sporting news. However, it should be mentioned that 30 percent expressed a negative feeling about how the media portray NFL players.
With respect to 19-21 year olds, 60 percent of this demographic reported no strong feelings either positively or negatively about how athletes are portrayed by the media. However, a sizeable minority (30 percent) say they believe the media portray athletes in a positive way.

Chart 5-B: 19-21 demographic

With respect to 22-30 year olds, 70 percent of this age group reported no strong feelings either positively or negatively about how athletes are portrayed by the media.

Chart 5-C: 22-30 demographic
With respect to 31-40 year olds, 70 percent of this age group reported no strong feelings either positively or negatively about how athletes are portrayed by the media.

With respect to 41+ year olds, 50 percent of this age group reported no strong feelings either positively or negatively about how athletes are portrayed by the media. However, a sizable minority (40 percent) believe that the media portray athletes in a negative way.
Question 6: “Media accounts of NFL players on and off the field behavior directly affects my opinion about the NFL as a whole.”

Chart 6-A: 14-18 year olds

With respect to 14-18 year olds, a slight majority (30 percent) are neutral on whether or not the media directly affect their opinion of the NFL.

Chart 6-B: 19-21 year olds

With respect to 19-21 year olds, a slight majority (30 percent) disagree that media accounts of player incidents affect their opinion about the NFL.
"Media accounts of NFL players on and off field behavior directly affects my opinion about the NFL as a whole." (age 22-30)

With respect to 22-30 year olds, an equal number of respondents (30 percent) either disagree or strongly disagree that media accounts affect their opinion about the NFL.

"Media accounts of NFL players on and off field behavior directly affects my opinion about the NFL as a whole." (age 31-40)

With respect to 31-40 year olds, a majority of respondents (40 percent) are neutral on whether or not the media directly affect their opinion of the NFL.
With respect to 41+ year olds, one-half of respondents (50 percent) agree that media accounts of player behavior directly affect their opinion of the NFL.

PART II: Initial Questioning
Three open-ended questions in part two of the pen and paper survey were designed to elicit an emotional and attitudinal response to three case studies. The case studies were as follows: 1. Contract Dispute; 2. Drug Offense; 3. Capital Crime (murder).

**Question 7:** What do you think and feel about the Terrell Owens situation concerning his contract dispute, his attitude and your opinion about the Philadelphia Eagles handling of the situation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorability</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Eagles</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Owens</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7-A: 14-18 demographic

Chart 7-A: 14-18 years old
With respect to 14-18 year olds, a slight majority believe the Eagles organization handled the situation very well. However, a sizeable portion of respondents sided with Terrell Owens and expressed a view that justified his actions and his search for more money (new contract).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorability</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Eagles</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pro-Owens</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7-B: 19-21 demographic

With respect to 19-21 year olds, an equal amount of respondents feel that the Eagles organization handled the situation in a positive way and that both Terrell Owens and the Philadelphia Eagles could have done better in how they handled the situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorability</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Eagles</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Owens</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7-C: 22-30 demographic
With respect to 22-30 year olds, a majority of the respondents feel that the Philadelphia Eagles handled the situation properly and gave Terrell Owens sufficient time to improve his relations with the team. However, it should be noted that 30 percent of the respondents felt that both the Eagles and Terrell Owens could have dealt with the situation differently.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age 31-40</th>
<th>Favorability</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Eagles</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Owens</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7-D: 31-40 demographic

Chart 7-D: 31-40 years old

With respect to 31-40 year olds, a majority (60 percent) of respondents feel that the Eagles handled the situation properly and with class. However, 40 percent of respondents felt that both the Eagles and Terrell Owens could have handled the situation differently.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age 41+</th>
<th>Favorability</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Eagles</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Owens</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7-E: 41+ demographic

Chart 7-E: 41+ years old
With respect to 41+ year olds, 70 percent of respondents feel that the Philadelphia Eagles handled the situation with class and with dignity. Respondents felt the Eagles organization gave Terrell Owens ample opportunities and refrained from involving itself in a war of words.

Question 8: What do you think and feel about Jamal Lewis of the Baltimore Ravens and his indictment on federal drug charges? How do you view the Baltimore organization in light of this incident?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorability</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Ravens</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Lewis</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8-A: 14-18 demographic

With respect to 14-18 year olds, a majority of respondents (70 percent) believe that the Baltimore Ravens acted accordingly during the incident and that Jamal Lewis should have been punished for his actions.
With respect to 19-21 year olds, 60 percent of respondents believe the Baltimore Ravens acted accordingly during the incident. However, a sizable minority (40 percent) believes that the Ravens acted accordingly but may have been too lenient.

With respect to 22-30 year olds, 50 percent of respondents believe that the Ravens did not take appropriate action. However, it should be noted that 40 percent of respondents believe that the Ravens are not to be blamed and that the organization acted accordingly.
With respect to 31-40 year olds, a large majority (80 percent) of respondents believe that Jamal Lewis should be punished and that the Baltimore organization did not do all that it could to show how tough it was on punishing its players for violations of team rules and codes of conduct.
With respect to 41+ year olds, 50 percent of respondents thought that the Ravens acted accordingly and that the team also could have done more to punish Jamal Lewis but didn’t because of a need for success and to make money. It should also be noted that 40 percent of respondents felt that the Raven did what needed to be done and acted appropriately.

**Question 9:** What do you think and feel about Rae Carruth, the former Carolina Panther wide receiver, who was convicted in the murder of his pregnant girlfriend? How does this incident reflect on the Carolina organization?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorability</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Panthers</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Carruth</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9-A: 14-18 demographic

With respect to 14-18 year olds, 90 percent of respondents believed that Rae Carruth committed a serious offense and should be punished accordingly. The incident had no affect on the image of the Panthers organization.
With respect to 19-21 year olds, 90 percent of respondents believed that Rae Carruth committed a serious offense and should be punished accordingly. The incident had no affect on the image of the Panthers organization.
With respect to 22-30 year olds, all of respondents (100 percent) believed that Rae Carruth committed a serious offense and should be punished accordingly. The incident had no affect on the image of the Panthers organization and the team is still viewed as a class organization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorability</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Panthers</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-Carruth</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9-D: 31-40 demographic

With respect to 31-40 year olds, a majority (80 percent) of respondents believed that Rae Carruth committed a serious crime and that this crime does not reflect on the Carolina organization. However, it should be noted that a small group (20 percent) believed that his crime does reflect poorly on the Carolina Panthers.
With respect to 41+ year olds, a majority (70 percent) of respondents believed that Rae Carruth committed a serious crime and that this crime does not reflect on the Carolina organization. However, it should be noted that a sizeable portion (30 percent) believed that despite favorability toward the Panthers, his crime does reflect poorly on the Carolina Panthers.
PART III: Follow-up Questioning

Before administering part III, respondents were given supplemental information on all three cases. Respondents were again questioned on each case study, this time in four parts, to gauge attitudes and opinions about the media, the athlete, the team and the NFL as a whole to determine if any changes in attitudes or opinion had occurred.

Question 10: What is your reaction to the media coverage of Terrell Owens' contract dispute with the Philadelphia Eagles?
10a. How do you feel about Terrell Owens in light of media coverage of the incident?
10b. How do you feel about the Philadelphia Eagles organization in light of the incident?
10c. How do you feel about the NFL in light of the incident?

Chart 10-A: 14-18 year olds

With respect to 14-18 year olds, 90 percent had a negative opinion of the media coverage concerning Terrell Owens. 70 percent of respondents had a negative opinion of Terrell Owens. 50 percent felt the Eagles organization handled the issue positively and 60 percent felt that the issue had no effect on the NFL's positive image.
With respect to 19-21 year olds, 50 percent had a positive opinion of the media coverage. 80 percent of respondents held a negative opinion of Terrell Owens in light of his incident. 60 percent felt positively about the Eagles after the issue and a slight majority (40 percent) of respondents still feel positively about the NFL after the Owens issue.

With respect to 22-30 year olds, 60 percent had a positive opinion of the media coverage. A majority of respondents (90 percent) held a negative opinion of Terrell Owens. Seventy percent had a positive opinion about the Eagles organization and 70 percent of respondents had a positive opinion of the NFL as a whole.
With respect to 31-40 year olds, 50 percent of respondents had a negative opinion of the media coverage. Seventy percent had a negative opinion of Terrell Owens. A 50 percent majority of respondents felt neutral about the Eagles organization and 70 percent of respondents had a positive opinion of the NFL.

With respect to 41+ year olds, 80 percent of respondents had a negative opinion about the media coverage of the incident. Eighty percent had a negative opinion about Terrell Owens. 60 percent of respondents had a positive opinion of the Eagles organization and 50 percent had a positive opinion of the NFL after the incident.
**Question 11:** What is your reaction to the media coverage to Jamal Lewis' indictment on federal drug trafficking charges?

11a. How do you feel about Jamal Lewis in light of media coverage of the incident?

11b. How do you feel about the Baltimore Ravens organization in light of this incident?

11c. How do you feel about the NFL in light of this incident?

With respect to 14-18 year olds, 60 percent had a positive opinion about the media coverage of the incident. Sixty percent of respondents had a negative opinion of Jamal Lewis. A majority of respondents (80 percent) had a positive opinion of the Ravens organization and 50 percent of respondents had a positive opinion of the NFL.

**Question 11: age 19-21**

With respect to 19-21 year olds, 80 percent had a positive opinion about the media coverage of the incident. Sixty percent of respondents had a negative opinion of Jamal Lewis. A majority of respondents (70 percent) had a positive opinion of the Ravens organization and 40 percent of respondents had a positive opinion of the NFL.
With respect to 19-21 year olds, 50 percent of respondents had a negative opinion about the media coverage of the incident. A 70 percent majority had a negative opinion of Jamal Lewis. An equal percentage of respondents (40 percent) had a positive or neutral opinion of the Ravens organization and 50 percent had a positive opinion of the NFL.

Chart 11-C: 22-30 year olds

With respect to the 22-30 year olds, 50 percent of respondents had a neutral opinion about media coverage of the incident. A 90 percent majority had a negative opinion of Jamal Lewis. Forty percent of respondents had a negative opinion of the Ravens organization and 60 percent of respondents had a negative opinion of the NFL.

Chart 11-D: 31-40 year olds
With respect to the 31-40 year olds, 60 percent of respondents had a neutral opinion about the media coverage of the incident. A slight majority (50 percent) had a negative opinion of Jamal Lewis. Sixty percent of respondents had a positive opinion of the Ravens organization and 60 percent had a positive opinion about the NFL.

With respect to 41+ year olds, 50 percent of respondents had a neutral opinion about media coverage of the incident. An 80 percent majority had negative opinions about Jamal Lewis. An equal percentage of respondents (40 percent) had a negative or neutral opinion about the Ravens organization and 60 percent of respondents had a negative opinion of the NFL.
Question 12: What is your reaction to the media coverage of Rae Carruth's conviction for second degree murder of his pregnant girlfriend?
12a. How do you feel about Rae Carruth in light of media coverage of the incident?
12b. How do you feel about the Carolina Panthers organization in light of this incident?
12c. How do you feel about the NFL in light of this incident?

Chart 12-A: 14-18 year olds

With respect to 14-18 year olds, 70 percent of respondents had a positive opinion about media coverage of the incident. All respondents had a negative opinion of Rae Carruth in light of this incident. One hundred percent of respondents had a positive opinion of the Panthers organization and 90 percent of respondents had a positive opinion of the NFL.

Chart 12-B: 19-21 year olds
With respect to 19-21 year olds, a slight majority (40 percent) had a positive opinion about the media coverage of the incident. Ninety percent of respondents had a negative opinion of Rae Carruth. A 90 percent majority had a positive opinion about the Panthers organization and 80 percent of respondents had a positive opinion of the NFL.

![Chart 12-C: 22-30 year olds](chart)

With respect to 22-30 year olds, 50 percent of respondents had a positive opinion about the media coverage of the incident. A 100 percent majority had a negative opinion of Rae Carruth. Eighty percent of respondents had a positive opinion about the Panthers organization and an 80 percent majority had a positive opinion of the NFL.

![Chart 12-D: 31-40 year olds](chart)
With respect to 31-40 year olds, an equal percentage of respondents (40 percent) had either a positive or negative opinion about the media coverage of the incident. Ninety percent of respondents had a negative opinion of Rae Carruth. A 70 percent majority had a positive opinion about the Panthers organization and 50 percent of respondents had a positive opinion of the NFL.

![Chart 12-E: 41+ year olds](image)

With respect to 41+ year olds, a 60 percent majority had positive opinions about the media coverage of the incident. Ninety percent of respondents had a negative opinion of Rae Carruth. A slight majority (40 percent) of respondents had negative opinions of the Panthers organization and 40 percent of respondents had negative opinions of the NFL.
Chapter V

Discussion

Through qualitative and quantitative questioning performed by the researcher, it has been found that media reporting has little to no affect on the development of public opinion about the NFL or its players. From examination of survey responses, it is clear that our sample population had similar feelings toward the NFL, the media and the player in each incident before and after taking this survey.

No sufficient data suggests a correlation between media influence and public opinion formation. The research suggests that public opinion is formed by latent attitudes held by the respondents, rather than from media reporting of incidents in the NFL. Therefore, this study shows that male fans of the NFL between the ages of 18 and 41+ develop their opinions based on cognitive or latent attitudes acquired or indoctrinated from some other source other than the media.

For all five age groups under study, all responded reported, on average, that television was their primary source of sporting news and information with respondents ages 41 and up adding newspapers as an equally important news medium.

All of the pen and paper survey respondents replied that they are fans of the National Football League in part one of the survey. When asked about their feelings toward the NFL in part three of the survey after reading factual information on all three case studies, a majority of respondents in all five age groups still responded positively toward the NFL, with a noticeable change in the 41+ age demographic. This can be
attributed to their answer in question six that the 41+ group agrees that how media reports sporting information directly affects their opinions of the NFL.

When respondents were asked the question “Do you believe media sources are ethical in their reporting of sporting news?” a slight majority answered that they believed media sources were not ethical in their reporting methods. The two youngest age demographics answered yes, while the 22-30 year old group and 41+ group answered no to the question. Respondents age 31-40 were neutral on the question with a fifty-fifty split in answers.

Next, respondents were asked the question “How do you feel media portray NFL players in terms of their ethical behavior?” Each age demographic surveyed had a majority of respondents answer neutral to the question, suggesting neither a positive or negative feeling toward media reporting of an particular athletes actions.

Respondents were then asked whether media accounts of NFL players on and off the field behavior directly affected their opinion of the NFL as a whole. A slight majority of all respondents felt neutral in their responses, indicating their ability to discern factual information from false information in order to form their own opinions. Two demographic groups responded, on average, in disagreement toward the question, indicating an ability to form opinions based on latent attitudes not influenced by the media. The oldest demographic group agreed to the question, showing that media plays an important role in the development of their opinions.

In part two of this survey, respondents were asked to give their feelings toward three different case studies dealing with three NFL athletes and their incidents. Respondents were first asked to give their thoughts and feeling toward Terrell Owens’ contract dispute and their opinions about the Philadelphia Eagles organization with
respect to the incident. A majority of all fifty respondents answered positively about the Eagles organization and their actions while disapproving of Terrell Owens and his actions. However, it should also be noted that a sizeable portion of respondents felt neutral toward both sides of the incident, showing no favoritism toward either Terrell Owens or the Eagles organization.

Respondents were then asked to give their thoughts and feeling about Jamal Lewis and his indictment on federal drug charges and their opinions of the Baltimore Ravens organization with respect to the incident. A very slight majority of all respondents felt neutral toward Jamal Lewis and the Ravens organization, stating that the Ravens organization did not do enough to address the problem and that Jamal Lewis committed a crime, but has since learned his lesson. However, a sizeable minority of respondents felt negatively toward Jamal Lewis and favored the Ravens organization, stating that Lewis should be punished to the fullest extent of the law and that the Ravens acted accordingly to the incident.

The last case study in part two of the survey asked respondents to give their thoughts and feeling on Rae Carruth, who was convicted in the murder of his pregnant girlfriend and their opinions of the Carolina Panthers organization with respect to this case. An overwhelming majority of all respondents favored the Panthers organization, calling the Panthers a “class” team, while condemning Rae Carruth for committing a serious crime, a crime for which he should be punished accordingly.

Part three of our survey results come from a retest of all respondents to questions asked in parts one and two of the survey and after administering factual information about each case study question in part two.
Question ten of our survey retested four questions based on the case of Terrell Owens to determine changes in opinion from initial questioning. A majority of all respondents felt as if the media did not do an adequate job of reporting this issue, echoing previous answers in question four that the majority of all respondents did not feel media reported sporting news in an ethical manner. The majority of all respondents also held the same opinion that the Eagles organization acted accordingly while Terrell Owens’ actions were viewed in a negative manner. Furthermore, the majority of all respondents to question ten stated that this incident did not change their opinion of the NFL as a whole. This answer reinforces the majority opinion in question six that fans are able to discern factual from false information delivered by the media when forming their own opinions about the NFL as a whole.

Next, respondents were retested on the same four questions with concern to the case of Jamal Lewis. A slight majority in this case felt neither positively or negatively about the media coverage of the Federal drug case. This shows a slight deviation from the majority answer in question four, but still holding closed to initial opinions that media does not do an ethical job in reporting sporting news. The majority of all respondents now indicate that their negative feeling about Jamal Lewis had risen ever so slightly, while the favorability toward the Ravens organization rose slightly as well. This can be attributed to factual reinforcement from the coaching between parts two and three of the survey. The fans still feel positively toward the Ravens organization and negatively toward Jamal Lewis, but are more convinced of these opinions now after reading the facts of the case. Furthermore, the majority of all respondents to question eleven stated that this incident did not change their opinion of the NFL as a whole. This answer reinforces the majority opinion in question six that fans are able to discern factual from false
information delivered by the media when forming their own opinions about the NFL as a whole.

Question twelve of our survey retested the same four questions with respect to the case of Rae Carruth. The majority of all respondents felt that the media did a good job in reporting the incident. This suggests that perhaps in the case of a severe criminal act, media are more truthful and factual in reporting the incident and that this accuracy is both perceived and believed by the public. An overwhelming majority still held the same opinions that Rae Carruth committed a serious offense and regard him with negative feelings while holding the Panthers organization in a positive light, reinforcing the opinion that the Carolina organization is a class group whom acted accordingly during the incident. Furthermore, the large majority of all respondents to question twelve stated that this incident did not change their opinion of the NFL as a whole. This answer reinforces the majority opinion in question six that fans are able to discern factual from false information delivered by the media when forming their own opinions about the NFL as a whole.

The quantitative and qualitative research supported only one of the study’s four hypotheses.

H1: The researcher hypothesizes that opinion formation, first and foremost, is influenced by the ethical content of the message itself.

The majority of all respondents surveyed answered that they do not believe media sources do a proper job of ethical reporting of sporting news. Furthermore, the majority of all respondents to the survey neither agreed nor disagreed to whether media accounts of NFL player incidents affect their opinions of the NFL. Further results of this study indicate a source for opinion formation not associated with the media. While all
respondents receive their knowledge of sporting news through one or more of the media listed in question three, attitude is determined by something other than the message itself. Common opinions of the NFL, player incident and team over part two and three show that latent attitudes are more likely to form opinion than the content of the message delivered by the media.

H2: Opinion formation is influenced by latent attitudes of the fans themselves. These latent attitudes or cognitive behaviors are the result of experiences or indoctrinated beliefs that people possess.

These attitudes are deeply seated in the convictions of each fan and are the starting point for the formation of public and individual opinion making. No significant deviation was observed from the results of the survey. Respondents held true to their initial opinions of player, incident, NFL and team. This consistency indicates that public and personal opinion concerning incidents in the NFL are developed through the individual cognitive attitudes held by the respondent, and not through any particular media influence.

H3: The age of the person under study directly affects the opinions made by that person or persons.

Younger fans admire the NFL for its star players and the action on the field while older fans rely greatly on precedents and standards established with their generation. As can be seen in our survey results, very little to no difference of opinion exists between the different age demographics. The majority of young fans and older fans feel similarly toward the issues at hand. This shows a deep understanding of moral rights and wrongs and the ability to correctly determine them as such. The small percentage of respondents that differed in opinions to that of their peers in all age groups is not of a significant
amount to suggest that the particular age of the respondent determines the opinion held about the issue.

**H4:** The media source that fans receive the majority of their news and information from will influence public opinion formation.

Different media sources provide information in different manners. The majority of all respondents to this study answered that television was the primary media source from which they received their sporting news, with the internet and print media garnering a close second and third place in importance. Since we assume that all respondents receive their information from one of the sources listed, and that very little to no change in answers over parts one, two and three of the survey occurred, we surmise that media source has little to no affect in influencing public or personal opinion.

Despite the difficulties associated with this study, it would be beneficial for interested parties to replicate this study using a larger universe of respondents. The results from replicating this study on a larger scale might prove, with a very high level of confidence, whether media does or does not influence mass public opinion with their messages. It would also be beneficial to see if this study could hold true to other professional sports leagues, such as professional basketball, baseball and hockey.

After reviewing the data, the researcher has based the following suggestions for further research and advice on this study's findings.

- Perform a national survey.

While the study performed by researcher provides valuable research into male National Football League fans in the South New Jersey area between 14 and 41+, it would be beneficial to national media and the NFL itself to perform this study on the national level. Just as this study focused on and received data on a particular area of the
country, a national survey would yield information into how media influences, if at all, public opinion across the country. This national study could also be additionally stratified to determine media influence in specific areas across the country.

- Study female fans of the National Football League.

  Because this study focused solely on male NFL football fans in the South New Jersey area, it would be most beneficial to also study female NFL football fans in the South New Jersey area to determine if there is a difference in opinion and media influence between males and females. Furthermore, there may be a difference in latent attitudes of males and females that might provide significant differences in results and add valuable insight into media influence of public opinion.

- Individual study of each age demographic.

  Each age demographic of the sample population selected contained a predetermined amount of respondents to that particular age group. A valuable recreation of this study might focus solely on one particular age demographic instead of a broad picture. Focus on a particular age group might yield more information into how age determines or influences public opinion. Moreover, specific age studies might provide information on whether or not peer pressures or peer influence has a strong or weak ability to sway public opinion within a specific age demographic.

- Research media methods of training in ethical reporting.

  An interesting idea for additional or secondary research would be to study how different media sources (TV, radio, print, etc.) train their reporters and editorial staff in ethics and ethical reporting. Remember, we contend that public opinion is, first and foremost, influenced by the content of the message itself. Further research into ethical media reporting might, in fact, yield information that would prove or disprove this idea.
References

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Associated Press, “Lewis Expected to Turn Himself in Thursday.” 26 Feb 2004

www.espn.go.com

PART I

1. What is your age?
   a. 14-18
   b. 19-21
   c. 22-30
   d. 31-40
   e. 41+

2. Are you a fan of the National Football League?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. It’s ok

3. What is your primary media source from which you get your sporting news? Rank order the following choices: 1. being where you get most of your news to 5. what you use the least.
   a. Newspaper
   b. Radio
   c. Internet
   d. Television
   e. Other

4. Do you believe media sources (TV, radio, internet, etc.) are ethical in their reporting of sporting news?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   3a. why or why not? (Please elaborate)

   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
5. How do you feel the media portrays NFL players in terms of their ethical behavior?
   a. Very Positively
   b. Positively
   c. Neutral
   d. Negatively
   e. Very Negatively

5a. why or why not? (Please elaborate)

6. "Media accounts of NFL players on and off field behavior directly affects my opinion about the NFL as a whole."
   a. Strongly agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neutral
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly Disagree

PART II

7. What do you think and feel about the Terrell Owens situation concerning his contract dispute, his attitude and your opinion about the Philadelphia Eagles handling of the situation?

8. What do you think and feel about Jamal Lewis of the Baltimore Ravens and his indictment on federal drug charges? How do you view the Baltimore organization in light of this incident?
9. What do you think and feel about Rae Carruth, the former Carolina Panthers wide receiver who was convicted in the murder of his pregnant girlfriend? How does this incident reflect on the Carolina organization?

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

***STOP! Before going on to Part III, please read the supplement provided!***

PART III
(Case study facts were reviewed before Part III questioning)

10. What is your reaction to the media coverage of Terrell Owens’ contract dispute with the Philadelphia Eagles?

____________________________________________________________________

10a. How do you feel about Terrell Owens in light of media coverage of the incident?

____________________________________________________________________

10b. How do you feel about the Philadelphia Eagles organization in light of the incident?

____________________________________________________________________

10c. How do you feel about the NFL in light of this incident?

____________________________________________________________________
11. What is your reaction to the Jamal Lewis' indictment on federal drug trafficking charges?

   ____________________________________________________________

11a. How do you feel about Jamal Lewis in light of media coverage of the incident?

   ____________________________________________________________

11b. How do you feel about the Baltimore Ravens organization in light of the incident?

   ____________________________________________________________

11c. How do you feel about the NFL in light of this incident?

   ____________________________________________________________

12. What is your reaction to the media coverage of Rae Carruths' conviction for second degree murder of his pregnant girlfriend?

   ____________________________________________________________

12a. How do you feel about Rae Carruth in light of media coverage of the incident?

   ____________________________________________________________

12b. How do you feel about the Carolina Panthers organization in light of the incident?

   ____________________________________________________________

12c. How do you feel about the NFL in light of the incident?

   ____________________________________________________________
Appendix B  
Survey Part III addendum

Level One – Terrell Owens, WR Philadelphia Eagles

Terrell Owens is a wide receiver for the NFL franchise Philadelphia Eagles in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Even before his arrival in Philadelphia, Terrell Owens had a very eventful past with his former team, the San Francisco 49ers. Terrell is considered as one of the best wide receivers in professional football today, but his actions on the field have been clouded by his actions and words off the field. Here are just a few of the incidents that Terrell Owens has gotten himself into in the past five years:

2001 – After blowing a 19-point lead against Chicago in a loss, Terrell Owens accused 49er’s head coach Steve Mariucci of protecting his good friend Dick Jauron, head coach of the Chicago Bears.

2002 – In a Monday Night Football contest in Seattle, Owens pulled a marker out of his sock after catching a touchdown pass. He then autographed the ball and gave the ball to his financial adviser sitting in an end zone luxury suite rented by Shawn Springs, the cornerback Owens had just beaten on the scoring play.

2004 – Terrell Owens agent failed to meet the free agency deadline in March, making him ineligible to become a free agent. Because the 49er’s retained the rights to Owens, he was traded to the Baltimore Ravens, but Terrell Owens refused to report to his new team. Instead, Owens filled a grievance with the players union claiming he had the right to be a free agent and go to whatever team his chose. After several negotiations, Owens was eventually traded to Philadelphia and signed a 7-year deal worth $49 million dollars against the advice of the players union.

1 A Timeline of Terrell Owens’ Antics; James Alder; 2005;  
http://football.about.com/od/nflnews/a/owenstimeline.htm?terms=TerrelI+Owens
2005 – After a stellar first season with the Eagles, Owens hires super-agent Drew Rosenhaus and announces that he is not happy with his contract and was going to renegotiate with the Eagles. Owens tells CNBC that, despite his $7.5 million in earnings the previous season, he needed a new contract to “feed his family.”

2005 – Owens shows up for pre-season camp with a bad attitude, not acknowledging reporters, or speaking to teammates. After a confrontation with head coach Andy Reid, Owens is suspended from camp for one week.

2005 – During an interview for ESPN, Owens takes shots at the Eagles franchise for not publicly recognizing his 100th career touchdown catch. During the interview he also said that the Eagles showed a “lack of class.” Owens also stated that the Eagles might be better off with Packers quarterback Brett Favre instead of Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb.

After months of verbal assaults toward the Eagles franchise, the quarterback and the coach, the Philadelphia Eagles announced in November that the team was suspending the beleaguered wide receiver indefinitely, meaning that Terrell Owens would not play football again until the 2006 season. Some people believe that Owens had a right to renegotiate his contract. His antics on the field are often defended as the on-field persona of an entertainer. Yet others see Owens as nothing more than a spoiled brat.
CASE #2

Level Two – Jamal Lewis, RB Baltimore Ravens

Jamal Lewis is a running back for the Baltimore Ravens of the National Football League. In 2003-2004, Jamal Lewis became a hero in the eyes of Baltimore and NFL fans everywhere when he posted the second highest rushing total in NFL history with 2,066 yards gained for the season, second only to NFL legend Eric Dickerson’s record of 2,105 yards. He became only the fifth player in NFL history to break the 2,000 yard barrier in a single season. At the conclusion of the season, Jamal Lewis was named Associated Press NFL offensive player of the year.

Shortly after the season, news broke that the federal government was filing federal drug trafficking charges against the Ravens star running back. Lewis was charged with conspiring to possess with the intent to distribute five kilograms of cocaine and using a cell phone in the commission of the first count. The alleged incident took place when Lewis tried to help a childhood friend buy cocaine in the summer of 2000. Prosecutors alleged that the cocaine buy was discussed by cell phone and during a restaurant conversation in the summer of 2000 involving Lewis, a boyhood friend and a woman who turned out to be a police informant.

Defense attorneys claim that the informants had set up Lewis and that the charges were “trumped up to exaggerate what actually happened” to help the informant avoid jail time. Lewis’s attorneys admit that Lewis was at the restaurant, but not for the reasons alleged in the indictment. The defense team accused authorities of creating a crime when

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2 Lewis Expected to Turn Himself in Thursday; Associated Press; Feb. 26, 2004; www.espn.go.com
none had taken place. Jamal Lewis had served a four-game suspension in 2001 for his second violation of the NFL’s substance and alcohol abuse policy. In keeping with its own policy, the NFL did not disclose the nature or details of the violation. As part of a plea bargain, Jamal Lewis pled guilty to a lesser charge and served four to six months in a Florida detention center during the summer of 2005, causing the Ravens star to miss mini-camp and part of the 2005 pre-season.
CASE #3

Level Three – Rae Carruth, WR Carolina Panthers

Rae Carruth, a wide receiver for the University of Colorado Buffalos, was drafted in the first round by the Carolina Panthers of the National Football League in 1997. During his three seasons in the NFL, Carruth had become a liability to the Panthers because of his injury problems. Rae Carruth dated many women during his career. Financially, Carruth’s commitments began to exceed his income and he became more concerned with his future. While dealing with a paternity suit and increasing debt, he learned that a woman he frequently dated, Cherica Adams, was pregnant with his child. People and friends described Carruth and Adams’ relationship as a casual one. Even after he learned of the pregnancy he still continued to date other women.

On Nov. 15, 1999, Adams and Carruth met to see a movie. It was only the second date the two had been on since Carruth learned of the pregnancy. When the movie was over, they left in separate cars and Adams followed behind Carruth. Shortly after leaving the cinema, a car drove up along the driver side of Cherica Adam’s car and one of the occupants began to fire his gun directly at her. She suffered four gun shot wounds to the back, damaging vital organs. Adams was rushed to the hospital where doctors were able to save her unborn baby. Adams was able to give police her account of what had happened and told of how Carruth was there in the car in front of her and blocked her car from fleeing the scene. Shortly after she had provided investigators with her account, she succumbed to her wounds and died.

Profile: Rae Carruth; Charles Montaldo; 2005; http://crime.about.com/od/murder/p/raecarruth.htm
Carruth, who had posted a $3 million bail agreed to turn himself back into police custody in the event Adams or her child died. When Carruth had learned of Adams death, he fled to Tennessee where FBI agents found Carruth hiding in the trunk of a friend’s car. Police arrested Carruth and three other men who drove the car that pulled along side Ms. Adams and opened fire. The four had been initially charged with conspiracy to commit murder, attempted murder and shooting into an occupied vehicle. After Cherica Adams death, the charges where changed to first degree murder.

The three men in the shooting vehicle agreed to testify against Rae Carruth for decreased sentences. All three admitted that Carruth wanted Adams killed to avoid having to pay child support and that Carruth was there blocking Adams car at the scene. The defense team argued that the shooting was a result of a botched drug deal that Carruth was going to finance but backed out of at the last moment. The trial took twenty-seven days with testimony from more than 70 witnesses. Without ever having taken the stand at his trial, Rae Carruth was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder, shooting into an occupied vehicle and using an instrument to destroy an unborn child. Carruth was sentenced to eighteen to twenty-four years in prison.