

INTERNAL ACTIVISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL  
LEGITIMACY: A CASE STUDY OF THE NBA'S REACTION TO THE NATIONAL  
ANTHEM PROTESTS IN SPORTS

by

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## ABSTRACT

COREY B. KELLY. Internal activism and its implications for organizational legitimacy: A case study of the NBA's reaction to the national anthem protests in sports. (Under the direction of DR. DANIEL GRANO).

Public relations scholarship, especially in recent years, has witnessed a growing call for studies that investigate how activists engage in public relations. There are still few studies on internal activism, despite its promise for new insights and discoveries, given that internal activists would seem to be more invested in maintaining organizational legitimacy. Therefore, this paper presents a case study analysis that investigates the NBA's collective reaction to the surrounding issues of protest and racial justice to illuminate how athletes engage in social activism, and how teams and leagues respond to such to activism in public. More specifically, I argue the collective response from the NBA to the anthem protests illuminates how tensions between organizational interests and internal activist publics' social justice activities can be productively negotiated, fulfilling societal obligations while still maintaining organizational legitimacy.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In response to multiple police-involved shootings of black men during the summer of 2016, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick of the National Football League (NFL) refused to stand for the national anthem to protest what he perceived to be the “oppression of black people and people of color” (Wyche, 2016). Given the national anthem’s cultural significance as a sacred American ritual, the protests inspired passionate, and often times divisive, debate across the gamut of social and political life, from casual fans to the President.

Kaepernick soon gained the support of other players, as anthem protests evolved throughout the NFL. However, many factions within the league also condemned Kaepernick for his protest. The New Orleans Saints’ Drew Brees was among a chorus of players who vehemently opposed Kaepernick for “being disrespectful to the American flag” (Triplett, 2016). Commissioner Roger Goodell, in thinly coded response to Kaepernick almost two weeks later, spoke of the need for players to show respect for “our country, for our flag,” as well as for the military and law enforcement (“Goodell Recognizes,” 2016). Even the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) Executive Director, DeMaurice Smith, disagreed with the protest, and would not commit to supporting other players who might engage in future acts of protest on the field (Zirin, 2016). Despite Kaepernick’s attempt to illuminate an important societal issue, it was his divisive method of protest that would arguably become *the* storyline of the 2015-16 NFL season. As

Vasilogambros (2016) writes, “Kaepernick sat for the national anthem to spark a debate on racial injustice, but he sparked a debate about how we should protest in this country” (para. 17). With protests continuing across the sporting landscape and the National Basketball Association (NBA) season set to begin soon, there was a growing sense that NBA players would also show solidarity with their counterparts in the NFL by protesting during the national anthem. *Fan Sided’s* Scott Hanna-Riggs (2016) believed NBA players had “the greatest opportunity to protest, with the least to lose,” which he was sure would be a “recipe for protests” (para. 11). This sentiment was common, and based on the presumption that the NBA is a more progressive league than the NFL. As *Reuters’* Neal Gabler (2014) writes, “The triumph of the NFL is a tribute to the triumph of American conservatism” (para. 1). Conversely, *ESPN’s* Kay Fagan writes, “The NBA is the most progressive men's sports league in the country” (Fagan & Isaacson, 2014, para. 1). Actions taken by the NBA in recent years have given credence to Fagan’s claim. For instance, the NBA banned former Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling for life after in 2014 after his racist remarks were made public (“Clippers Owner,” 2014). Also, in 2016, the NBA removed Charlotte as the host city for its 2017 NBA All-Star Game in response to legislation passed in the state that the league believed to be discriminatory against a protected class of citizens (“NBA Releases Statement,” 2016).

Ahead of training camp, the NBA and the NBA Players Association (NBPA) released a joint statement emphasizing the league and the union’s desire to “come together” and develop “substantive ways” to create “meaningful change.” In response, NBA players expressed a call for unity and a desire to seek out avenues where the league could affect change. “I think with this organization we’ll have the support with what we

feel we want to voice, but we're going to do it as a unit," said the Dallas Mavericks' Wesley Matthews (Newberry, 2016). The New Orleans Pelicans' Anthony Davis spoke about going beyond symbolic protests: "I think actions speak louder than words. You can say whatever, but if you don't do anything to prove that you [are] actually doing what you're speaking it means nothing" (Reid, 2016). Summarizing the players' stance, *Bleacher Report's* Howard Beck and Jonathan Abrams (2016) wrote, "While the NFL's Colin Kaepernick and other athletes are using the national anthem to make a stand for social justice, NBA players are already pursuing a different path: action over symbolism" (para. 3).

In this thesis, I present the NBA's reaction to Kaepernick's actions and the surrounding issues of protest and racial justice as a case study that illuminates how athletes engage in social activism, and how teams and leagues respond to such to activism in public. More specifically, I argue that the collective response from the NBA to the anthem protests illuminates how tensions between organizational interests and internal activists' social justice activities can be productively negotiated, fulfilling societal obligations while still maintaining organizational legitimacy.

Activist publics have been widely studied in public relations literature. Most often, studies on activist publics take place at the organizational level of analysis. Excellence Theory has contributed much to what we know about activist publics, yet scholars contend that the two-way symmetrical worldview that undergirds the theory produces analyses that reflect the goals of organizations, limiting the potential for alternative perspectives (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Karlberg, 1996). Dozier and Lauzen (2000) call for the reconceptualization of public relations from a professional activity to



an intellectual domain to broaden the boundaries for theory and research, thereby making it possible to study activist publics from a public relations perspective. Other public relations scholars have joined in calling critical theories and approaches to studying activists (Coombs & Holliday, 2012a; Coombs & Holliday, 2012b; Curtin, 2016; Stokes & Rubin, 2010; Toledano, 2016)

In most public relations literature, activists are cast as organizational “outsiders.” However, the activism of members within an organization- for example, when employees or managers pressure organizations to address social justice issues through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives- may shape organizational legitimacy in ways public relations scholars have not fully attended to.

To address these problems I focus on an understudied activist public: internal activists. I define internal activist publics as two or more organizational members who identify an issue, either in society or within the organization, and seek to change it by motivating organizational involvement. More specifically, I conceptualize professional athletes as internal activists, in order to identify the ways in which activist professional athletes practice public relations. I contend that NBA players as professional athletes are especially empowered internal activists who challenge many of the assumptions of activist publics held by public relations scholars.

My hope is that the findings from this case study offer both theoretical and practical implications for understanding internal activist publics in the context of public relations scholarship and professional sports organizations.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, there have been numerous examples of professional athletes using their respective platforms to address important social and political issues. The most prominent moment signaling this shift came in 2012, when LeBron James tweeted a photo of him and his Miami Heat teammates donning hoodies to protest the death of Trayvon Martin (“Heat Don Hoodies,” 2012). Similar protests also arose across sports after the death of Eric Gardner in 2014, led by NBA players who wore “I Can’t Breathe” T-shirts over their pre-game warmups (Powell, 2014). Most recently, after multiple police-involved shootings of black men during the summer of 2016, James and fellow NBA stars Chris Paul, Dwyane Wade, and Carmelo Anthony opened *ESPN’s* ESPY awards show with a denunciation of gun violence and a call to action for other athletes to use their platform to affect positive social change (“LeBron James,” 2016).

These examples of recent activism break from the prevailing narrative over the past few decades centered on the failure of athletes to continue the work of past athlete-activists (Agyemang, 2012; Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010; Grano, 2009; Powell, 2008; Rhoden, 2006). This conversation often reflects significant athlete-led protests throughout the 1960s, a period of athlete activism that is often romanticized and then contrasted against modern day sport. There was the “Ali Summit” in 1967, where Muhammad Ali, flanked by other activist sports stars Jim Brown, Bill Russell, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (then Lew Alcindor), emphatically refused to enlist in the draft for

the Vietnam War (Wright, 2012). Only a year later, John Carlos and Tommie Smith formed what would become one of the most iconic images of an athlete protests to-date when they gave the “Black Power” salute during the medal ceremony at the 1968 summer Olympics (Moore, 1991).

Some thought that acts of protest such as these had signaled a turning point in sports, where athletes had finally realized their potential to become driving forces for social change. The decades that followed provided little promise of this supposed realization. Thirty years later, sociologist Harry Edwards, a key figure who helped organize the 1968 Olympic protests, espoused some of the frustrations with athletes held by many in the black community:

Today’s black athlete is very different. Their identity is different- they live in a rich, largely white world, a world where black individuality is tolerated so long as it is without reference to the black community. If you asked them about the history of the black athlete, many couldn’t tell you much. They don’t find that history relevant to their world... They don’t care about whose shoulders they stand on. They have no idea about who set the table at which they are feasting. And the worse part about it is not that they are ignorant of this history, but they are militantly ignorant. (Leonard, 1998, para. 32)

Indeed, given their perceived ability to affect social change, athletes’ collective political silence over the past few decades was considered their “fundamental failure” (Grano, 2009, p. 192).

Before the latest wave of activism in recent years, many reasons were proffered as to why athletes chose to remain neutral on social and political issues. Related to the sporting context specifically, Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz (2016) contended that the vitriol from fans in response to activism served to deter some athletes. Their study of social media posts after five then-St. Louis Rams players protested the death of Eric Gardner suggested that the overwhelmingly negative reaction from fans may be

explained, in-part, by football's close association with American national identity (Butterworth, 2012). Further, Cunningham and Regan (2012) based the dearth of athlete activism on three possible perspectives held by athletes. First, they argued that many of the social ills that were prevalent in the 1960s and '70s had diminished as a result of changing social norms, and that therefore, modern athletes may not have felt as compelled to engage in activism. Second, athletes may have perceived athletic excellence, not social activism, to be their primary focus (Cunningham & Regan, 2012). Finally, Cunningham and Regan (2012) suggested that the fear of financial repercussions from teams and sponsors dissuaded athletes from engaging in activism.

Indeed, the "economic argument" has been commonly proffered by scholars to explain athlete's silence on social and political issues. For instance, Khan (2012) claimed that corporations had commodified athlete's blackness, and thus, the economic success that athletes enjoyed had dissuaded them from speaking out on divisive issues that could compromise this. Khan (2012) argued that the "black athlete has been sold to Nike," and that the "activist-athlete is simply a figure frozen and flattened in a famous photograph, a well-passed aberration given over to history" (p. 5). Khan's perspective might best be summarized by Chicago Bulls star and Nike-sponsored athlete, Michael Jordan. In the mid-1990s, Jordan justified being politically neutral by arguing, "Republicans buy sneakers too" (Badenhausen, 2011). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that only a couple years before this comment, Jordan witnessed the ramifications that being politically active could have. During a visit to the White House in 1992, his teammate, Craig Hodges, passed a note to President George H. W. Bush that expressed the player's displeasure with some of the social issues negatively affecting minority communities.

The Bulls waived Hodges soon after and he would never play another game in the NBA (Gill, 2016).

Despite the economic and social reprisal that may incur for engaging in social and political issues, recent trends suggest athletes will, in fact, insert themselves into divisive social and political issues that affect the black community. For organizations, this brings to the surface important issues regarding how best to maintain organizational legitimacy, while still supporting the athletes that they employ. I argue here that organizational interests and internal activist publics' social justice activities require productive negotiation in a manner that allows both parties to fulfill their collective societal obligations while still maintaining organizational legitimacy. Thus, this revival of athletes as activists, specifically as internal activist publics within their respective sports organizations, calls for a reconsideration of previous assumptions about activism in public relations scholarship.

#### Activism as a problem in Public Relations

While Excellence Theory and its mixed-motives model remains the dominant paradigm within public relations scholarship, a growing faction of critical scholars now contend that the theory's overtly corporate-centric perspective makes it ill equipped to address how activists also engage in public relations practices (Coombs & Holliday, 2012b; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; J. E. Grunig, 1992; Stokes & Rubin, 2010). Still, proponents of both approaches typically conceptualize activists as organizational outsiders; only recently have studies begun to investigate internal activism (Curtin, 2016; Toledano, 2016). The activism of members with an organization- for example, when employees or managers pressure organizations to address social justice issues through

corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives- may shape organizational legitimacy in ways public relations scholars have not fully attended to. That is, despite having separate goals, organizational leaders and internal activists would seem to have a shared interest in maintaining organizational legitimacy. At the same time, the activities of internal activists might directly challenge the policies, values, and practices of the organizations to which they belong. Thus, internal activism creates productive tensions both from “within” and “outside of” organizational contexts, requiring an approach that works beyond the “outsider” approach to activism common in public relations scholarship.

In what follows, I first outline the components of Excellence Theory, then consider some of the critiques of it, before finally explicating how internal activism and legitimacy considerations serve to reframe this debate.

#### Excellence Theory and Attitudes Toward Activism

Excellence Theory is the result of more than two decades of studies led by J. E. Grunig and his colleagues, originally conceptualized from survey and interview data from more than 300 CEOs and managers of public relations firms throughout the world to determine the characteristics of effective public relations (Dozier, L.A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995; J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). The four models of public relations originally proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984) form the core of this theory (pp. 21-36).

Each model reflects different goals and values, which are understood by the flow of communication (one-way/two-way) and its intended effects (asymmetrical/symmetrical). The first model, *press agency*, characterizes attempts to gain publicity by almost any means possible. The second, *public information*, consists of

in-house journalists who disseminate objective, yet decidedly positive information about the organization. The *two-way asymmetrical model* involves tailoring persuasive messages to specific audiences based on previous research on the organization's publics. Finally, with the *two-way symmetrical model*, organizations research and then engage in dialogue with their publics to build understanding and improve relations. Thus, the first two models constitute one-way communication, and the first three represent asymmetrical strategies meant to persuade the organization's publics.

J. E. Grunig (1989) previously argued on behalf of the two-way symmetrical model, which he characterized as involving attempts at negotiation and compromise, as the model that represented excellent public relations. However, Murphy (1991) challenged this assumption by suggesting a mixed-motives approach that encompasses both two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical strategies and tactics. Such an approach recognizes that organizations and publics have different interests, and hence, organizations should try satisfying both their own interests and their publics. The mixed-motives model, since adopted in works by Excellence theory scholars, seeks to balance the interests of organizations and publics, where both enter into a "win-win" scenario.

Excellence Theory has contributed much to what we know about activist publics. Dozier, L.A. Grunig, and J E. Grunig (1995) contend that activists "push organizations toward excellence" (p. ix). Yet these scholars tend to hold a contentious view of activists. For instance, L. A. Grunig (1992) writes that activists' goals are to "exert control over the organization even as outsiders" (p. 504). As such, "Activism, indeed, represents a major problem for organizations" (L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 522). Thus, a growing faction of

scholars believe that the inherent bias of this theory not only delegitimizes activism on its face, but also fails to acknowledge how activists engage in public relations.

#### Responses to Excellence Theory and the Elevation of Public Relations Activism

Despite its predominance, Excellence Theory has faced intense scrutiny from some public relations scholars, who have called for and less oppositional approaches to activist perspectives (Coombs & Holliday, 2012a; Coombs & Holliday, 2012b; Curtin, 2016; Stokes & Rubin, 2010; Toledano, 2016). As Smith (2013) contends, activists' goals are not dissimilar from those of other organizations:

Activists use public relations strategies and tactics to pursue two general goals. The first is to influence public opinion and behavior to rectify the situation they see as problematic. The second is to create and maintain organized, structured, and coordinated efforts. (p. 7)

To accomplish these goals, activists use many of the public relations strategies and tactics common to “more institutionalized organizations” (Smith, 2013, p. 6). Indeed, Coombs and Holliday (2012b) trace the origin of public relations practice to activist groups.

Karlberg (1996) laments how the two-way symmetrical model is most often “applied within an asymmetrical research agenda” that privileges organizational interests. This underlying corporative-centric perspective casts activists as obstacles that an organization must “manage” or “deal with,” instead of as publics with which an organization should seek to improve relations (Coombs & Holliday, 2012b, p. 352; Dougall, 2005; Toledano, 2016).

Dozier and Lauzen (2000) argue that true symmetrical communication is next to impossible, given that organizations often have access to more resources, and therefore, more power than activists. These scholars promote a reconceptualization of public



relations from a professional activity to an intellectual domain to broaden the boundaries for theory and research, and thereby making possible for studies on activist publics.

Excellence Theory scholars' biggest blind spot is perhaps their uniform characterization of activists as "external forces" (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p. 443). In characterizing activists in this way, Excellence theorists fail to account for internal organizational members who also may engage in forms of activism. Even so, to date only a few studies, critical or uncritical, have investigated internal activism (Dougall, 2005). From a postmodern public relations perspective, Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) call for practitioners to act as activists, serving as the ethical consciousness within their respective organizations. However, the role of professional practitioners is "inherently different from those of nonprofessional internal publics" who also engage in activism (Curtin, 2016, p. 20).

Of the limited studies on internal activism, past research has considered this form of activism from the perspective of nonprofit organizational members, whistleblowers in the financial industry, university employees, and employees of a multinational company in the food industry (Curtin, 2016; Greenwood, 2015; Luo & Jiang, 2013; McCown, 2007; Toledano, 2016). While few, these studies illuminate some important considerations regarding internal activism.

As McCown's (2007) study on employee activism suggests that internal activists exhibit similar behaviors and employ similar tactics as external activists. Curtin (2016) finds that internal activist publics may use organizational resources, therefore mitigating some of the power difference that exists between activist publics and target organizations. More specifically, Curtin's (2016) study evidences how internal activists relied on the

reputation of their organization, the Girl Scouts, to gain legitimacy for their protest.

Curtin (2016) maintains that internal activists “may be able to access resources that external activists cannot and use commonly viewed organizational strengths as a strategic tool to promote their own causes that are at odds with the organization” (p. 29).

There is a need for more studies that investigate how internal organizational members engage in activism. The present study seeks to accomplish this by considering athletes as internal activists, an example of organizational members who possess more power than traditional activist publics.

### Defining Legitimacy and Internal Activist Publics

#### Organizational Legitimacy

Legitimacy is an organization’s most important currency. Legitimacy is granted by society, and gives organizations the “right to exist and conduct operations” (Metzler, p. 322). Suchman defines legitimacy as “a generalized perspective or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574). Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) contend that legitimacy reflects a “congruence between the social values associated with or implied by organizational activities and the norms of acceptable behavior in the larger social system” (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975, p. 122). Indeed, Meyer and Scott (1983) contend that organizations must act in accordance with cultural expectations.

Being the target of activists’ pressure tactics can threaten an organization’s legitimacy. Smith (2007) defines activism as “the process by which groups of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions that the activists find problematic” (p. 5). Activist pressures may come from

special interest groups, issue groups, grassroots opposition, social movements, or pressure groups (L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 504). Further, social, political, or economic concerns may give rise to activism. Hence, a range of institutions may be targeted, such as government agencies, corporations and non-profit organizations.

#### Internal Activist Publics

No clear definition exists for internal activists. L. A. Grunig (1992) defines an activist public as “a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics, or force” (p. 504). While activists may be a part of a group, as Dougall (2005) explains by example, organizational employees who are “seeking some measure of organizational change” are still “clearly ‘internal’ publics” (p. 536). Dougall (2005) expands upon this, writing:

The problem of distinguishing between who or what belongs to the organization, and who or what is part of its environment, is resolved by conceptualizing activists first and foremost, as publics. In other words, while the activist group is always an activist public, the activist public is not always an activist group or organization. (p. 536)

Because of this unique relation to the organization, internal activists, says Curtin (2016), “often occupy liminal standings” (p. 29). Similarly, as the *Financial Times* lexicon entry on internal activists explains, internal activists are “‘inside outsiders’, in that they have dual allegiances. They want their organisations to do well, but they also want them to respond to the needs of the times” (“Definition Of Internal Activist,” n.d., para. 2). This statement more closely reflects why L. A. Grunig’s (1992) definition of activists does not encompass the “spirit” of many internal activists’ intentions, that is, internal activists, I argue, would be less inclined to resort to “pressure tactics” or “force” (p. 504).

The *Financial Times* defines internal activists as “People who work from inside their organisations to take on current challenges such as environmental sustainability, social justice and corporate responsibility” (“Definition of Internal Activist,” n.d., para. 1). Adapting this, I offer the following definition of internal activist publics: Two or more organizational members who identify an issue, either in society or within the organization, and seek to change it by motivating organizational involvement. This definition of internal activist publics encompasses organizational members who may take issue with an organization’s practices, or who believe that the organization could or should do more to address issues in society that relate to the organization’s operations. This definition also considers how internal activist publics impose pressure on organizations to affect their policies, practices, and public outreach.

#### Athletes as Internal Activists

Sport has historically been a site for social activism, and a myriad of studies have investigated the social activism of athletes. Public relations scholars, however, have yet to consider athletes in terms of internal activist publics. Focusing on internal activism from the perspective of athletes is critical to advancing new understandings about internal activists within critical public relations research, especially considering how athletes wield considerable power in society as well as within the institutions that employ them.

While the Excellence Theory has been criticized for its failure to adequately address the power relations between organizations and their publics, this issue becomes amplified in the context of sports (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Karlberg, 1996). For instance, professional athletes do not face many of the same constraints in comparison to other activist publics. Traditionally, activist publics gain power by organizing into large groups

a way to gain media attention; given their celebrity status, professional athletes do not necessarily have to form collectives as a means of bringing media attention to issues they find important. Perhaps most importantly, the actions of professional athletes can have major economic implications for their employers.

Prominent professional athletes are often the primary revenue generators for their franchises and can become brands unto themselves (LaFeber, 1999). After NBA star LeBron James decided to return to play for the Cleveland Cavaliers, *Forbes'* Patrick Rishe (2014) suggested that the franchise's valuation would rise by \$100 to \$150 million, which serves as evidence of James' power. Further, many professional athletes -including players in the NBA and NFL- have formed labor unions in order to collectively bargain with their league employers, thus allowing players to make demands of their teams and leagues regarding interconnecting issues of profit and social justice. By engaging in actions that directly affect the bottom-line interests of their employers, athletes are especially empowered activists.

While there are not many internal publics that possess such power, the most adequate comparison to athletes may be shareholder activists. Uysal and Tsetsura (2015) contend that social shareholder activists advocate on behalf of the interest of other non-shareholding stakeholders by urging corporations to move beyond a purely profit-based focus. One caveat here is that social shareholder activism is often concerned with the harmful practices of the organization (Uysal & Tsetsura, 2015). I contend here that while athletes may engage in activism to stop negligent organizational practices, they may also do so for the purpose of redirecting their organization's attention to broader social issues. As Lee and Lounsbury (2011) explain, social shareholder activists leverage their position

for the purpose of improving the company's CSR initiatives. Like shareholder activists, athletes too may pressure their respective organizations to address important societal issues through CSR.

Unlike shareholder activists, professional athletes are the public faces of their organizations, and are essential to the organization's maintenance of a public image. Moreover, professional athletes provide the organization's primary "product" through their performances in games. So when professional athletes engage in internal activism they are effectively altering what it is the organization is selling, and doing so in a very public manner, as their celebrity status provides them a platform to advance their agenda.

Also different from other kinds of internal activists, professional athletes might have an interest in engaging with social issues to improve their popular standing. As I mentioned earlier athletes are in many ways brands unto themselves, and their participation in social issues may serve as a form of brand development. I also noted that athletes have in the past been hesitant to enter the political arena because of concerns that they will lose fans or sponsors by mixing sport and politics. But due to changing expectations surrounding inequality and athlete-activism, professional sport stars may stand to benefit from being politically active and may withstand criticism for remaining silent on issues. There are certainly still barriers and risks associated with athlete activism, especially surrounding divisive issues and symbols. Kaepernick's national anthem protest is a good example of an athlete risking public condemnation as well as his professional career for being outspoken. But for NBA players, speaking out on issues of racial injustice and other issues that affect their own communities and the communities of fans- especially given the racial composition of the NBA and its fan base- may be

beneficial in a way that is not true for other kinds of internal activists. As long as it appears to be authentic, activism for NBA players can serve as a “meaning based” brand development strategy designed to make players appear as conscientious and compassionate, or more directly, to build a player’s presence on social media. Still, because many sports fans still prefer that they stick to sports, activism can just as easily create unwanted attention for professional athletes.

So, professional athletes do not fit neatly into an existing frameworks for “internal activism” within current public relations research. Where the category of internal activism helps is in identifying professional athletes as “inside outsiders,” whose role and status cannot be sufficiently addressed through Excellence Theory’s negative position toward activists as outside of or in opposition to organizational interests. Yet professional athletes need to be thought of in different terms from other internal activists, due to a) the power of their public status within the organization; b) their status as brands unto themselves; and c) the fact that they are uniquely empowered to engage in social activism, while at the same time constrained by popular expectations for the role of athletes in politics. While acknowledging these key distinctions, I conceptualize professional athletes as internal activists in this study because a) they are engaging in activism while at work; b) their actions compel the organization to respond; and c) the organization is affected by their actions.

### Summary

Recent examples seem to suggest a rebirth of athlete activism. For both organizations and athletes, this brings to the forefront important practical questions regarding how both parties can cooperatively negotiate their interests in a manner that

maintains organizational legitimacy. Theoretically, the rebirth of athlete activism raises important questions about how public relations scholarship has traditionally conceptualized activism. In the following chapter, I will outline two specific cases that illuminate how the process of internal activism takes place in the NBA.



### CHAPTER 3: RECENT HISTORY OF ACTIVISM IN THE NBA

When Colin Kaepernick knelt during the playing of the national anthem to protest what he perceived to be the injustice perpetrated by police against “black people and people of color” across the nation, it served as an important reminder that this generation of athletes would no longer remain silent in the face of controversial social and political issues (Wyche, 2016). While NFL players have driven the most recent examples of protests in sports, it is the players in the more progressive NBA that have been some of the driving forces behind the modern re-birth of professional athlete activism over the past few years. To better understand how internal activism transpires in the NBA, in this chapter I revisit two specific cases of NBA player protests, each of which are particularly significant to the contemporary history of protests in sports.

In the first case, I re-examine the NBA’s response to the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin (Modiano, 2017). The nexus of the NBA player protests centers specifically on a photo in which LeBron James, Dwayne Wade and their Heat teammates each donned hoodies in a show of solidarity with Martin. With diverse off-the-court portfolios and global media profiles, the willingness of James and Wade to interject themselves into such a racially polarizing case has led some to consider it to be the defining moment that signaled the re-birth of contemporary athlete activism. John Carlos, who along with Tommie Smith gave the “Black Power” salute at the 1968 Olympic games, specifically

identified the photo as such. “When the Heat stood up and made that statement, it was saying to everybody, ‘Enough is enough,’” Carlos said (Sheinin, 2014, para. 15).

The second case recalls the NBA player protests after the controversial death of Eric Garner at the hands of police in 2014. In response, many of the NBA’s biggest stars inspired a league-wide protest, violating the league’s rule for on-court apparel by wearing black T-shirts inscribed with the words “I Can’t Breathe,” what Garner repeatedly said to police in the last moments before his death. As Kay (2015) writes, “The ‘I Can’t Breathe’ display was the most wide-ranging athlete protest in recent memory.”

For both cases, I performed a simple Google search constrained by a two-week timeframe to capture any relevant news reports, commentaries, press releases, interviews or social media posts of relevance for each case. For the first case, I searched between March 23<sup>rd</sup>-April 6<sup>th</sup> of 2012, applying the terms “NBA” and “Trayvon Martin”; for the second case, I searched between December 6<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> of 2014, applying the terms “NBA,” “Eric Garner,” and “I Can’t Breathe”. In what follows, I provide an overview the player protests and the league officials’ response in each case, before then extrapolating predominant themes across both cases to explicate how internal activism transpires within the context of the NBA.

### The Rebirth of Athlete Activism

In a gated Sanford, Florida, community in March of 2012, neighborhood watch coordinator George Zimmerman fatally shot 17-year-old Trayvon Martin as the teen was returning home from a nearby convenience store (Botelho, 2012). Zimmerman spotted Martin, who was wearing a hoodie, and then quickly called police to report “a real suspicious guy” (Botelho, 2012). Disregarding the dispatcher’s demand that he wait for police to arrive, Zimmerman pursued, and within seconds a scuffle ensued between two

(Botelho, 2012). Only seconds later, Zimmerman opened fire, killing the unarmed teen. The controversial killing of Martin quickly gained national news coverage, as the narrative of racial profiling began to take shape, inspiring protests throughout the nation.

As it happens, Martin was returning home to watch his favorite players- Miami Heat stars James and Wade- in the NBA All-Star Game the night that he died (Witlock, 2014). Fittingly, it was James and Wade who organized the photo with their Heat teammates that would inspire protests by other NBA players in response to Martin's death. In the photo, all of the Heat players are standing in a dimly lit room wearing hoodies, with their heads bowed and their hands in their muffs. While the players are simply using the muffs for their functional purpose, the image of their concealed hands and faces signifies how just wearing a hoodie could insight fear in an onlooker with racial biases. Before his team's game that evening, James posted the photo on his Twitter account along with the hashtags "#WeAreTrayvonMartin #Hoodies #Stereotyped #WeWantJustice" (James, 2012). James and Wade also wrote "RIP Trayvon Martin" on their game shoes, with Wade adding "We Want Justice" (Helin, 2012).

Following the example set by James and Wade, many other players across the league performed small acts to show solidarity with Martin. Some players included quotes for the teen on their game shoes, posted and shared posts with hashtags similar to those used by James, and changed their Twitter avatars to photos of themselves wearing hoodies (Hill, 2012). Other players engaged in more blatant, yet less publicized acts of protest. For instance, Amare Stoudemire and his New York Knicks teammate Carmelo Anthony both posted photos of themselves on Instagram wearing hoodies- a violation of

the NBA's "business casual" dress code policy- upon arrival for their team's game ("NBA," 2005).

Critics could easily try to undermine the significance of many of these acts, for instance, by casting them as examples of "clicktivism." However, this was 2012. By using social media platforms to voice their discontent with the perceived, and in many places, very real divide between the police and black communities, these players were demonstrating a revival of social consciousness that was often absent or unacknowledged by previous generations of athletes. Further exemplifying the players' widespread investment in the particular case, the NBPA, an organization that is otherwise mute about issues unrelated to collective bargaining, released a statement on the issues surrounding Martin's death:

The reported facts surrounding Mr. Zimmerman's actions indicate a callous disregard for Mr. Martin's young life and necessitate that he stand trial. The NBPA also calls for the permanent resignation of Sanford Chief of Police Bill Lee and a full review of the Sanford Police Department, for dereliction of duty and racial bias in this matter and others. Their silence in the face of this injustice is reprehensible and they cannot be trusted to safe guard the citizens of the Sanford community equally. (Golliver, 2012)

Despite the NBPA's statement and the many examples of NBA players engaging in protests in response to Martin's death, arguably one of the most notable aspects of the case was the NBA league office's silence. The Commissioner of the NBA at the time, David Stern, was a characteristically authoritarian executive, especially surrounding player conduct policies. Yet, Stern did not levy any fines for dress code violations by players. For that matter, neither Stern nor anyone else who reported directly to him in the league office issued a statement on Martin's death or the protests by NBA players. At some level, the league office's lack of response could have been partly due to the element of surprise.

The political stance taken by NBA players was a deviation from the norm in contemporary professional sports culture. The common perception was that professional athletes, especially highly marketable stars like James, Wade, Anthony, and Stoudemire, had become too corporatized; they would never place the interests of their respective sponsors at risk by engaging any social or political issues, much less highly controversial issues like racial discrimination and police misconduct. Before his Twitter post in 2012, reporters never asked James “about the issues of the day,” said *ESPN* reporter Brian Windhorst, someone who had covered James since high school (Wiedeman, 2017). Only four years before he led protests in response to Martin’s death, James himself said, “One thing you can’t do is confuse sports and politics” (Wetzel, 2008). In retrospect, one can only wonder if this reinvigoration of athlete activism would have transpired if not for the connection between the NBA and Martin. It was on Martin’s return home to watch the second half of the NBA All-Star Game, which was taking place only a short drive away from Sanford in Orlando, when the Heat fan from Miami Beach was killed (Hill, 2012).

#### NBA Players Wear “I Can’t Breathe” T-shirts to Protest the Death of Eric Garner

In 2014, NBA players led protests after the death of Eric Garner by wearing “I Can’t Breathe” T-shirts over their pre-game warmups. In July of that year, New York Police Department (NYPD) officers approached Garner on the suspicion that he was selling single cigarettes outside of a convenience store (Goldstein & Schweber, 2014). NYPD officers moved to arrest Garner, putting him in a chokehold and pushing him face down on the sidewalk (Goldstein & Schweber, 2014). Garner repeatedly stated, “I can’t breathe,” but the officers ignored his cries, and he would die only moments later (Goldstein & Schweber, 2014). Garner’s death sparked protests throughout the country,

reigniting claims of police brutality by officers against people of color. That December, when a grand Jury returned a recommendation for indictment of the officers involved, NBA players began their protests.

Three days after the decision, Chicago Bulls star Derrick Rose donned a black “I Can’t Breathe” T-shirt during warmups for his team’s game that Saturday night (Highkin, 2014). After the game, *CBS Chicago* sports columnist Dan Bernstein, who was a history of harshly criticizing Rose’, suggested that Rose’ controversial stance put the legitimacy of the organizations he represented at risk, tweeting, “@drose just put himself, The #Bulls and @adidas squarely on a side of a third-rail issue. It's huge” (Bernstein, 2014a). For Rose’ part, he tied his internal activist behaviors to the violence he witnessed growing up in Chicago. Wearing the “I Can’t Breathe” T-shirt was his way of “trying to change the kids' minds across the nation” (Highkin, 2014).

When asked by reporters about Rose’s T-shirt, James opined that it was “spectacular,” and insinuated that he would like one as well (Cacciola, 2014). That Monday night, James’ Cavaliers were on the road against the Brooklyn Nets. The game was surrounded by additional intrigue, with Commissioner Adam Silver in attendance, along with special guests Prince William, and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, as well as more than 100 credentialed members of the news media (Cacciola, 2014). When the Cavaliers took the floor for warmups, James and teammate Kyrie Irving both wore “I Can’t Breathe” T-shirts, as did Kevin Garnett and three other Nets players (Cacciola, 2014). The following night saw players from both the Sacramento Kings and Los Angeles Lakers sport “I Can’t Breathe” T-shirts (Harvey, 2014). Some Lakers players

even continued to wear the T-shirts while sitting on the bench during the game (“Kobe Bryant,” 2014).

While the Lakers’ Kobe Bryant was among some of NBA’s most prominent stars who joined the protest in response to the Garner case, his participation was especially significant. Just months before, Bryant was widely criticized for his comments regarding the protests led by James and other NBA players in response to Martin’s death two years earlier, as he opined that he would not be protest killings like Martin’s for the simple fact that he is a black man (McGrath, 2014). Some accused Bryant, who spent a large part of his childhood in Italy while his father played professionally, of being “out of touch” with the black community (Nye, 2014). Nevertheless, after Garner’s murder, Bryant’s tone had changed:

It's become a thing where people standing up for their rights, they're really questioning the justice system, they're questioning the process of the legal system and those who have authority and whether or not they're abusing authority, and what's the threshold to use that force, and so forth and so on. But that's what our nation was founded on. We have the ability to question these things, and in a peaceful fashion. And that's what makes us a great country. (“Lakers Don,” 2014)

NBPA Executive Director Michelle Roberts spoke glowingly about the “I Can’t Breathe” protests, emphasizing how NBA players are “members of the community” who “are affected by events- just like the rest of us” (Cacciola, 2014). Roberts’ counterpart, NBA Commissioner Silver, offered a calculated response. He did not speak publicly, instead he responded to a *Yahoo! Sports* email request for comment, in which he replied, “I respect Derrick Rose and all of our players for voicing their personal views on important issues, but my preference would be for players to abide by our on-court attire rules” (Wojnarowski, 2014). Days later in an interview with *ESPN*’s Andy Katz for *Outside the Lines*, Silver clarified that he would prefer players “not become billboards

during our game for their political standpoints,” although he understood the uniqueness of circumstance, and thus, “stood down in essence and allowed it to happen” (“NBA Commissioner,” n.d.).

#### Internal Activism in the NBA

Two themes emerged across both cases that can help further explicate the broader recalibration of power relations between NBA players and league executives. The first is the prominence of star player involvement. Having the internal activism come from stars like James, Wade, and Rose, Anthony, Stoudemire, and Bryant is a central component in both protests. At the time of the protests, all of these stars had already been awarded some of the NBA’s most prestigious individual accolades, won championships and Olympic gold medals, and established global brands off-the-court. Also, in 2012, the two pairs of Heat and Knicks teammates all ranked among the top 17 NBA salaries that season; and in 2014, Bryant, James and Rose were among the highest-paid players, ranking 1<sup>st</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, respectively (“NBA Player,” n.d.; “NBA Player Salaries,” n.d.). Delving further, all six aforementioned players ranked among the top seven NBA players for total combined earnings in 2012, according to *Forbes* (Badenhausen, 2013).

As such, before engaging in potentially polarizing acts of protest, these players had already accrued considerable amounts of legitimate and referent power with leaders of their organizations and the NBA league offices, as well with their peers, fans and the media. Collectively, they were some of the league’s most marketable players, which must have limited the league’s options in terms of responding to these acts.

*NBA player’s disregard for established league policies* is second major theme.

The NBA’s “business casual” dress code policy specifically outlines appropriate off-the-



court attire (“NBA,” 2005). Anthony and Stoudemire explicitly violated the rule. The non-response from Stern signaled a small victory for players. Nevertheless, the violation was a multi-dimensional issue for the league, given the larger context in which it occurred. First, the highly controversial “business casual” policy was replete with racial overtones. Given that players were responding to perceived racial injustices in society made salient by Martin death, ignoring the violation arguably was the best way to maintain the legitimacy of the NBA.

Additionally, by 2012, players were reconstituting the norms of “business casual” with every new outfit. Ironically, the fashion-conscious Stoudemire was widely considered by designers as the NBA player who bridged the gap between players and high-end fashion designers (Appleman, 2011). The outgrowth players’ increased focus on their off-the-court style was their broader cultural appeal, which, from a corporate perspective, meant the potential for new audiences. Thus, enforcing the rule in such an extreme instance could have been counterproductive to the league’s overarching goals.

In the second case, a large number of players throughout the league who wore “I Can’t Breathe” T-shirts violated the league’s policy, which mandates that players wear the official apparel sponsor of the NBA, Adidas. Commissioner Silver’s response to this violation illuminates the delicate situation he faced, needing to balance player interests with the interests of one of the league’s most important corporate sponsors. Silver’s public comments in the days after the protests gave some indication as to how he tried to accomplish this balance. That is, in both instances, Silver forewent any demands, and instead, said that it was his “preference” that players wear the league-issued attire going forward. However, to appeal to Adidas, and the league’s future sponsor, Nike, he was

noticeably more insistent in the second statement about his desire to see players refrain from such acts going forward.

Examining the broader context of both cases also provides a larger understanding of a power shift created by NBA player's internal activism. That is, in comparison to the 2012 protest, the heightened intensity of the 2014 protests indicates that the players were operating from a stronger position of power than two years earlier. First, the dress code rule that was violated in the first case only concerned the issue of the league's image; by the second case, the violation directly impacted the league's legitimacy with its corporate sponsors, namely Adidas. Second, the player's methods evolved from social media posts, to engaging acts of protest on NBA courts where their message could gain the most visibility. And third, the number of players and teams who engaged in acts of protest also grew exponentially from one case to the other. Consider that the Heat were the only team to protest in 2012; in most other instances, individual players performed acts. By 2014, what started with one individual, Rose, soon proliferated to the point where there were multiple instances of full teams protesting.

Finally, Khan (2012), Rhoden (2006), Powell (2008) and many other scholars have criticized professional athletes as having "*souled out*" to corporate powers who demand their social and political constraint in return for the financial incentives provided by the commodification of their likeness. As I have outlined in this chapter, NBA players' internal activist behaviors exhibit their heightened sense of social consciousness in recent years, challenging these scholars' criticisms of corporate athletes.

## CHAPTER 4: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF THE NBA'S RESPONSE TO NATIONAL ANTHEM PROTESTS IN THE NFL

In the wake of numerous high-profile police shootings of African-Americans throughout the summer of 2016, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick began the pre-season by sitting during the national anthem as a form of silent protest to bring attention to issues of police brutality in America. Other NFL players soon in solidarity with Kaepernick. Kaepernick's protest became a lightning-rod, inspiring passionate, though often polarizing debate across the gamut of social and political life, from casual fans and sports reporters, to some of the most influential political leaders, including the President.

For all of the players, coaches, and executives in the NFL who voiced support for Kaepernick, just as many condemned him and the other players who joined him for the way they chose to spread their message. With NBA training camps set to begin soon, many thought the NBA players would join in solidarity with their NFL counterparts by also protesting during the national anthem. Yet, to the surprise of many, such developments never occurred.

In this chapter, I present a case study analysis of the reaction from those in the NBA to the national anthem protests led by players in the NFL. Specifically, this case study focuses on how the discourse and actions from NBA players to illuminates how athletes engage in social activism in a manner that serves both the interests of society and

the sports leagues of which they are members. Given the influential roles that sporting figures occupy in society, this case study offers new perspectives to better understanding how athletes, teams and leagues can operate in a tenuous social and political climate to affect important changes without undermining the organizational legitimacy of sports leagues.

#### The NFL, Colin Kaepernick, and the Nation Anthem as a Site for Protest

In the wake of the recent shootings that had taken place in the past weeks and months, NBA stars Dwayne Wade, Carmelo Anthony, Chris Paul, and LeBron James opened the *ESPN's* ESPY awards show by calling for an end to gun violence (“LeBron James,” 2016). Reminding those in attendance of the legacy of activism left by the man they were remembering in a special tribute later that night, Muhammad Ali, James put forth a challenge to his fellow athletes:

...Let's use this moment as a call to action to all professional athletes to educate ourselves, explore these issues, speak up, use our influence and renounce all violence and, most importantly, go back to our communities, invest our time, our resources, help rebuild them, help strengthen them, help change them. We all have to do better. (“LeBron James,” 2016)

When the NFL pre-season began, Kaepernick answered this challenge by refusing to stand for the national anthem to bring awareness to the issue of police brutality.

For the first two weeks of the NFL pre-season, Kaepernick protest during the pre-game ritual went largely unnoticed, as he did not dress for either game because of an injury (Brinson, 2016). Finally, when Kaepernick repeated his protest while in uniform against the Green Bay Packers, the image quickly gained media attention. In a press conference two days later, Kaepernick addressed the subject:

I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There

are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder. (Wyche, 2016)

The same day, the 49ers organization released a statement voicing support for Kaepernick, justifying his protest as free speech (Wyche, 2016). In addition, NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy clarified the league's position, saying that players were encouraged but "not required to stand during the playing of the National Anthem" (Florio, 2016b).

Kaepernick and his controversial method of protest became the storyline. For many, the anthem is a sacred American ritual, a source of national pride, and a way to show respect to those troops who have fought and died to assure our freedom. Former football player and Special Forces soldier Nate Boyer expressed some of these sentiments in his piece for the *Army Times*, "An Open Letter to Colin Kaepernick" (Boyer, 2016). The letter caught the embattled quarterback's attention, and he met with Boyer the following day.

During their meeting, Kaepernick and Boyer jointly decided that going forward, the quarterback would kneel instead of sitting to spread his message while also showing respect for the military (Brinson, 2016). Kneeling was the best compromise, Boyer thought, because the act of kneeling carries with a very symbolic meaning for many in the military:

When we're exhausted on patrol, they say take a knee and face out. So we take a knee like that. We'll take a knee as the classic symbol of respect in front of a brother's grave site, a soldier on a knee. (Wagoner, 2016)

That Sunday as the national anthem played, Kaepernick and teammate Eric Reid took to one knee as Boyer stood in attention right beside them (Sandritter, 2016).

Kaepernick's display of internal activism soon gained many more supporters. Before another game that day, Jeremy Lane of the Seattle Seahawks sat to show solidarity with Kaepernick (Sandritter, 2016). Then, on the opening night kickoff of the NFL Regular Season that Thursday, the Denver Broncos' Brandon Marshall, a college teammate of Kaepernick's, knelt during the anthem in front of a nationally televised audience (Florio, 2016a).

With the first Sunday of the NFL Regular Season coinciding with the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, some teams decided to project a message of unity during the anthem. Teammates from the Seattle Seahawks and Kansas City Chiefs locked arms with each other before their respective games (Lui, 2016). The New York Jets joined first responders in holding the American flag during the national anthem, as did the Houston Texans before their game (Slater, 2016). Still, many other players, undeterred by the heightened potential for backlash, knelt or raised their fists in the Black Power salute (Slater, 2016).

#### A (Racially) Divided League

Despite the growing list of NFL player joining in solidarity with Kaepernick, many others remained divided over the protests. The Philadelphia Eagles' Malcom Jenkins said he would "rather be doing something in the community" and discussing the issues at hand with "people who can actually make some change" (Berman, 2016). The New York Giants' Justin Pugh, whose brother is in the military, tweeted, "I will be **STANDING** during the National Anthem Tonight. Thank you to ALL (Gender, Race, Religion) that put your lives on the line for that flag" (Leonard, Clayton, & Walder, 2016). For Pugh's teammate, Victor Cruz, the decision was simple:

The flag is the flag. Regardless of how you feel about the things that are going on in America today and the things that are going on across the world with gun violence and things like that. You've got to respect the flag and stand up with your teammates (Reyes, 2016).

By their comments, the three aforementioned players, each of whom are black, provided an indication that their race would not be the singular factor shaping their perspective of the protests.

Nonetheless, it was hard not to realize that most of the emotionally charged responses to Kaepernick came from white players. New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees, one of the more respected players among his peers, said he felt compelled to speak out in opposition to the way that Kaepernick chosen to protest:

I disagree. I wholeheartedly disagree. Not that he wants to speak out about a very important issue. No, he can speak out about a very important issue. But there's plenty of other ways that you can do that in a peaceful manner that doesn't involve being disrespectful to the American flag. (Triplett, 2016)

Other comments from white players were more condemning of Kaepernick. The Minnesota Vikings Aaron Boone, a former teammate of Kaepernick's, said the quarterback's actions were "shameful," adding,

That flag obviously gives (Kaepernick) the right to do whatever he wants. I understand it. At the same time, you should have some (expletive) respect for people who served, especially people that lost their life to protect our freedom. "We're out here playing a game, making millions of dollars. People are losing their life, and you don't have the common courtesy to do that. (Pelissero, 2016)

The Cincinnati Bengals' Tyler Eifert shared an Instagram post of a family member in the military with the caption "Thanks for defending the flag that really matters, even for the people who don't appreciate it (Breech, 2016)!" And in a now-deleted tweet, T.J. Yates said, "It blows my mind how many people hate the country they live in" (Lamothe, 2016).

Not one white player participated in the national anthem protests at any point during the 2016 NFL season. The Seattle Seahawks' Michael Bennett reasoned that black players needed white players to be involved in the protests in they were going to make further advancements:

You need a white guy to join the fight. The white guy is super important to the fight. For people to really see social injustices, there must be someone from the other side of the race who recognizes the problem, because a lot of times if just one race says there's a problem, nobody is realistic about it ("Seahawks Michael Bennett," 2016).

Bennett's teammate, Cliff Avril, said that if just of the NFL's white stars, "like, say, Aaron Rodgers," got behind the protest, "it would touch home for a lot more people" ("Seahawks Michael Bennett," 2016). When asked, Rodgers said, "The flag represents the greatest ideals of the United States of America, not the worst" (Marvez, 2016). Rodgers added that getting large-scale player involvement for future protests could "create a domino effect" within the league, even though he felt "some guys in the NFL are probably worried about repercussions on speaking their mind from the league" (Gantt, 2016). Rodgers' statement reflects the constraints to internal activism in the NFL. By promoting the "the shield" (the NFL brand) foremost, instead of its star players, the NFL has historically been able to limit their agency.

#### NFL Officials Respond to the Anthem Controversy

Despite all of the criticism he was receiving, one could assume that Kaepernick could find support from DeMaurice Smith, the Executive Director of the NFLPA. However, only hours after Kaepernick's initial comments, even Smith- who is also black- was dismissive of the protest, saying that he personally felt "honoring the flag is important" (Zirin, 2016). When pressed further about how the NFLPA would support



players who engaged in protests like Kaepernick's, Smith again shied away from throwing his full-fledged support behind the players:

I think, unfortunately, this is the part where you get the lawyer answer from me because it's a complicated, fact-specific question of when things take place. We do have rules that govern what players can wear, what they can't wear, what they can put on their shoes, what they can say, what they can't say. Demonstrations like this are not protected union activity, obviously. Some issues of freedom of expression are probably going to be OK. I can certainly think of some that would probably run afoul of NFL rules. I think it's important not to get engaged in sort of a blanket statement about what's permissible and what's not. (Zirin, 2016)

Thus, when Kaepernick needed support most, the man charged with defending the interest of all NFL players remained indifferent, not willing to alienate himself from owners and other league officials who opposed Kaepernick.

The NFL league office remained rather silent regarding Kaepernick's anthem protest, despite the growing cloud of negative publicity that hung over the league. The NFL did offer a statement after the quarterback's initial press conference, but eleven days passed before NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell addressed the controversy. Responding via email to an *Associated Press* request for comment, Goodell said:

Well my personal thoughts are ... I support our players when they want to see change in society, and we don't live in a perfect society. We live in an imperfect society. On the other hand, we believe very strongly in patriotism in the NFL. I personally believe very strongly in that. I think it's important to have respect for our country, for our flag, for the people who make our country better; for law enforcement, and for our military who are out fighting for our freedoms and our ideals. ("Goodell Recognizes," 2016)

In the same email, Commissioner Goodell acknowledged that he did not "necessarily agree" with Kaepernick, and that while players have both a platform and a right to use it, "We encourage them to be respectful and it's important for them to do that" ("Goodell Recognizes," 2016).

The son of a former U.S. Senator, the late Charles Goodell, Commissioner Goodell's concerted focus on America and what it stands for provides a lens through which he interprets the protest controversy. Words like "respect" and "country" littered throughout Goodell's email serve as tokens that denote his ideological disagreement with Kaepernick. For all Goodell did say, it only provided a window into his personal thoughts; he did not clearly articulate how the NFL would act in response to continued episodes of protest going forward. Commissioner Goodell's statement could only be qualified as a non-response response, despite the NFL having eleven days to ruminate over the best way to represent the league's interests. He did not tell NFL players that the league supported their protests; likewise, he did not mandate that players stand for the anthem. This is not to say that Goodell should have voiced support or condemnation, only that indifference in a time of uncertainty only served to exasperate the tensions surrounding the anthem protests.

Similarly, NFLPA Executive Director Smith also failed to provide any direction for the players. He did not express much support, if any, for Kaepernick or any other players who might have decided to join in solidarity with the quarterback, or engage in any other form of protest in the future. If NFL players were looking to Executive Director Smith or Commissioner Goodell for any direction, they were surely disappointed. The only clear takeaway? On a personal level, both men blatantly disagreed with using the anthem as a site for protest.

Contextualizing the comments from Goodell and Smith within the broader culture of the NFL provides some indication of their thoughts. That is, the demographics of the fans, those who confer social legitimacy on the NFL, gives some indication to why the

protests were so divisive. That is, eighty-three percent of all NFL fans are white, and the largest age bracket is fifty-five (Anzilotti, 2016; Simmons, 2007). Therefore, older white men comprise a significant amount of NFL fans. Taking into consideration the fact that twenty-one percent of fans are more likely to identify as republican- and the protest took place during the height of a heated presidential race- maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the NFL's most important stakeholders arguably meant distancing themselves from Kaepernick's actions (Anzilotti, 2016).

Despite Kaepernick's presumably well-placed intentions to shed light on a serious issue of police brutality in America- it was not his message, but his method, that arguably became the storyline of the 2016 NFL season. Irrespective one's personal feelings toward Kaepernick or perceptions about the relationship between the black community and police in America, one thing is for sure: the national anthem as a site for protest inspired wide-ranging and often divisive debate, ultimately posing a threat to the organizational legitimacy of the NFL.

#### Case Study: The NBA's Response to the NFL-led National Anthem Protest

A typical criticism of case study research is that it does not provide any generalizable findings beyond the specific case. Flyvbjerg (2006) combats such criticism, arguing that generalizability can be increased by strategically selecting atypical or extreme cases. He argues these cases provide more information because they are rich in detail and involve more actors and basic mechanisms (p. 229). This case study explores the NBA's response to the national anthem protests by NFL players to gain unique insight into how internal activism takes place in professional sports. The NBA was still in its off-season at the time the protest movement began in the NFL; therefore, to provide a

full account of the developments within the NBA, this case study encompasses a timeframe from August 27, when Kaepernick's protest first gained media attention, to the end of October, the beginning of the NBA Regular Season. To capture all of the comments and actions by NBA players and league officials, I performed two broad searches of News Bank and Google applying the search terms "NBA," "anthem," and "protest." Any artifacts, opinion pieces, press releases or social media postings that could provide relevant context were considered for analysis. In what follows, I present three themes that emerged from the analysis.

#### A Period of Uncertainty Ahead of Training Camp

At the time when Kaepernick's protest first gained media, the official start of NBA training camp was still a month away. As such, the potential for protests in the more progressive NBA became a prevalent, if not provocative, subject that permeated the media discourse. Some questioned if the protests witnessed in the NFL would translate over to the NBA. If so, what forms would these protests take? How would Commissioner Silver and the league office respond? Would he fine the players, or support them? Heightening the uncertainty surrounding the issue were two factors: the historical context of anthem protests in the NBA, and the inaccessibility of players prior to training camp.

Unlike the NFL, the NBA has a long-standing policy in place that outlines how players, coaches and trainers should act during the national anthem. Specifically, the policy states that all parties are required to "stand and line up in a dignified posture along the sidelines or on the foul line during the playing of the National Anthem" ("Official Rules," 2015). Therefore, this policy presumably presented a cause for concern for

players, given that past instances pointed to negative repercussions for players who defied this policy.

Twenty years before Kaepernick, NBA player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf (formerly Chris Jackson) refused to stand for the national anthem, claiming that such an act was against his faith (Diamos, 1996). The NBA responded by suspending Abdul-Rauf indefinitely; after a one-game absence, the league reversed course and reinstated him. More recently, in 2014, the Cleveland Cavaliers' Dion Waiters also invoked his faith as justification for remaining in the locker room during the anthem (Richard, 2014). Waiters stood for the anthem two days later, and after the game, he said the whole situation was an issue of "miscommunication," despite being quoted verbatim in the original story (Haynes, 2014).

Taken in context, the treatment of Abdul-Rauf arguably influenced both Waiters' decision to recant his original statement, and the decision players in the present context would need to make regarding anthem protests. Abdul-Rauf was out of the NBA only two years after his protest after not being able to land a contract, despite his unquestionable talent and relative youth (Williams, 2016).

While the NBA's anthem policy and the two aforementioned cases undoubtedly fueled speculation regarding the potential for protests by players, further compounding this issue was the limited number of players who addressed the controversy in its early stages. This was partly because Kaepernick's protest gained attention during the final month of the NBA off-season, and thus, there were no league-mandated media interviews or community relations appearances, contexts were players would presumably face questions about the issue.

The first comment given by any player came after a *TMZ* reporter raised the issue to Nick Young, the colorful Los Angeles Lakers guard. Asked for his thoughts, Young said he would “do the same thing” as Kaepernick; but when he was pressed for further clarification, a visibly uninterested Young jokingly suggested, “My knees hurt, I might sit” (“Nick Young,” 2016). Days later, Iman Shumpert of the Cleveland Cavaliers released a song in which he raps, “you best believe I'm going to take me a knee for the anthem” (Vardon, 2016).

Ahead of training camp, Oklahoma City Thunder guard Victor Oladipo was the only player to address the idea of potential protests from a league-wide perspective. He was adamant about the NFL protests transferring to the NBA. “Oh, no question. I truly believe it will,” he said, before adding, “People are gonna be looking at some guys in the NBA to see what they're gonna do as well” (“Victor Oladipo,” 2016). As the Golden State Warriors’ Andre Iguodola, a member of the NBPA Executive Committee and one of the NBA’s most articulate players explained, there were competing tensions to consider: “There’s two sides to it (from the league’s perspective). There’s a personal and a business side” (Amick, 2016).

#### Unity over Division: NBA players and League Officials Work to Together

On September 21<sup>st</sup>, five days before the first official day of training camp, Commissioner Silver and NBPA Executive Director Roberts released a joint statement to address the issue facing the league:

This summer at the ESPY awards, Carmelo Anthony, LeBron James, Chris Paul and Dwyane Wade stood on stage and spoke eloquently about the senseless acts of violence impacting our communities. Over the last several weeks, many of you have reached out to us, both to solicit advice on how you can get involved to create positive change and to ask for support as you develop your own efforts. The league and the Players

Association, working together, have begun developing substantive ways for us to come together and take meaningful action. These ideas are based on the actions many of you have already taken or supported, including convening community conversations in NBA markets to engage young people, parents, community leaders and law enforcement in a candid dialogue; using our game to bring people together and build bonds of trust in our communities; and supporting mentoring and career development programs that bring economic opportunity to young people of color. As we begin to move forward with these programs, it is really important that we hear from you. We will be working with your teams during training camp to get your thoughts and ideas. We know that together we can make a real difference and are eager to continue the conversation with you. As always, please feel free to reach out to each one of us. (Spears, 2016)

The tone of the statement is conciliatory in that it forgoes any mention of the league's anthem policy, and instead emphasizes how the league and the union want to "come together" and develop "substantive ways" to create "meaningful change." *CBS Sports'* Matt Moore (2016) said Commissioner Silver and NBPA head Roberts were trying to "prevent incidents that could harm their image or sponsor relationships." It is likely that the players too did not want see any incidents that would harm the league's legitimacy, given the revenue-sharing system of which they are members. In-fact, as *ESPN's* Windhorst (2016) tweeted, the representatives from the league office and the NBPA met earlier that week before the statement was released and "agreed to work together to address possible protests."

Nevertheless, NBPA Executive Director Roberts- who is also black- being directly involved in constructing the league's action plan signifies the players' influence over the league. Just two years earlier, she and Silver held starkly different views of the "I Can't Breathe" protests.

Player Comments Provide Evidence of Two-Way Symmetry. NBA Media Day, which marked the unofficial start to training camps league-wide, came just after the NBA and NBPA's joint statement, finally providing a chance for players to voice their opinions

about the issues of protests and racial injustice. Unity remained a consistent theme throughout the players' comments. Specifically, they articulated this theme by emphasizing team solidarity, and the importance of projecting a positive, unifying message to external audiences.

“Whatever we’re doing we’re doing with unity,” said the Dallas Mavericks’ Harrison Barnes (Newberry, 2016). In coming to a decision about if or how they would protest, many NBA players, like Barnes, stressed team solidarity; that is, no one player would engage in any action apart from his teammates. Communication was inherent to accomplishing this goal, an underlying theme of many players’ comments. Miami Heat guard Tyler Johnson said, “I do think it's important for the whole team to kind of be on the same page on what exactly we're doing” (Richardson, 2016). Dirk Nowitzki of the Dallas Mavericks also echoed this metaphor: “If we do something we want the whole team to be on the same page” (Price, 2016).

P.J. Tucker, one of the NBA’s elder statesmen on the youngest team in league history, the Phoenix Suns, said, “As a team I guess that’s something we are going to have to talk about” (Stonebarger, 2016). Similarly, Darren Collison said he and his Sacramento Kings teammates would need to “sit down and have a team meeting” (Jones, 2016a). A third Maverick, Wesley Matthews, summarized this perspective: “Not one person is just going to go out there, and everybody else doesn't know what's going on, and I think that's just really is going to embody this team and what this team is going to be about” (Price, 2016). As Matthews’ comment implies, NBA players did not want to create controversy by engaging in individual protests similar to what was happening in the NFL.



For DeMarr DeRozan of the Toronto Raptors, the importance of team solidarity was less about thwarting individual agency than it was about recognizing the differences that exist among teammates. “As long as we do it, just making sure we're all on one accord,” DeRozan said, before adding:

Anything we do, we're supporting one another, and that's what it's all about, being able to try to make a difference, and understanding everybody's point of view, thought process, because like you said, everybody didn't grow up in Compton. So their point of view on something may be different from mine. (Wolstat, 2016)

Like DeRozan, the Brooklyn Nets’ Jeremy Lin, who arguably is among the most qualified players to comment on such an issue, stressed the importance of not alienating one group in favor of the other:

I will say the one thing that I will make sure is I don't want to do anything alone. I want something to be united, I want there to be solidarity, because I don't want it to be X versus Y, or Group A versus Group B versus Group C or whatever. It has to be, if I do anything, I would want to be behind a stand of unity, because I think that's what we need. That's what I think our nation needs right now. (Botte, 2016)

Aaron Gordon of the Orlando Magic also focused on the importance of not creating any further division. “What we need to avoid is creating a divide, and that's what is beginning to happen, Gordon said, before continuing, “It's kind of a turning into 'us versus them' or 'them versus us,' and at no time has that been beneficial... The more that we can unify, the better” (Robbins, 2016). Jae Crowder of the Boston Celtics summarized this perspective, saying, “You can't fix negative problems with negative energy” (Westerholm, 2016).

When pre-season games tipped-off on October 4<sup>th</sup>, the unity message translated into on-court demonstrations across the league. Before their first game, the whole Toronto Raptors team locked arms with each other as the anthem played (Nathan, 2016).

Over the next few days, the Washington Wizards, Milwaukee Bucks, Sacramento Kings and Utah Jazz engaged in similar demonstrations (Rohrbach, 2016). Players from the Celtics locked arms and held hands with each other, reenacting the same demonstration that the 1960-61 Celtics team had done to promote civil rights (Forsberg, 2016). Before the game, the team also released a video on its Twitter page in which all of the Celtics players appeared, sending a message of “unity, progress and love” (“A Message,” 2016).

Other forms of protests emerged as well. Players from the Houston Rockets and New York Knicks interlaced and locked arms together, and nights later, Los Angeles Lakers and Denver Nuggets players did the same (Nathan, 2016; Wind, 2016). Among all of the demonstrations, the Portland Trail Blazers were the only team that did not stand in a straight line; during the anthem, the team stood in a circle at the free-throw line, with their heads bowed and their arms around each other (Rohrbach, 2016).

In their comments after the demonstrations, many players reinforced the idea of projecting unity by their actions. Rodney Hood of the Jazz said that his team wanted to “embrace each other, and show a sign of unity,” much like the Kings’ Rudy Gay who said his team’s demonstration was “a way we show our unity and our support” (Jones, 2016b; Jones, 2016). Gay’s teammate, DeMarcus Cousins, echoed this sentiment: “We’re all aware of the situation going on right now. And one thing we can do with these issues is just unite everybody” (Jones, 2016b).

The Rockets’ James Harden said that his team’s joint demonstration with Knicks players was a message to those watching was that the league was a unified whole:

We wanted to use our high power and noticeability to just go out there and make it aware that we're going to stand together, not just the two teams, but the entire league. We want to use our platform to show people that we're together and we're behind them in this. (Nathan, 2016)

The Knicks' Joakim Noah, like Harden, also pointed to the demonstration as a sign of league unity, saying, "We understand that there are there are issues in this country and we wanted to show solidarity and show that we're all in this together." Furthermore, Noah also illuminated how the demonstrations brought awareness to those issues, while still being "very respectful" during the anthem (Rohrbach, 2016).

Other players also emphasized the importance of being respectful, signaling a collective awareness among them that a divisive act could undermine their message. As the Wizards' Bradley Beal said, "We all agreed that we wanted to do something to show that we're peacefully protesting it. That's probably the calmest and least disrespectful way to do it" (Michael, 2016). Three Atlanta Hawks teammates also spoke about demonstrating in a respectful manner. "It's pivotal that we get our message out and we do it in a very respectable way," said Kent Bazemore (Vivlamore, 2016b). Kyle Korver said, "It's important for us to be unified in our message. Be respectful" (Vivlamore, 2016a). Finally, Dwight Howard, who devised the plan to have all fans in attendance lock arms with each other, reinforced this message once more:

Before the games, we still want to pay homage to all those who died to fight for our country but at the same time we want to show that we are unified. We want everybody who is at the arena to show respect to each other. (Vivlamore, 2016b)

As the comments exemplify, players expressed unity in terms of both acting "together" as teammates and projecting a positive, unifying message. The theme also appeared in the statement, as "together" was used to describe unity between the players and the league ("coming together"), as well as in terms of unifying external audiences ("using our game to bring people together and build bonds"). This suggests that the players and the league were coordinating their message to reflect similar values.

Moreover, the tempered manner of the player demonstrations also aligned with the overarching goal of promoting unity over division. No players knelt, gave the Black Power salute, or engaged in any individual act. The demonstrations may not have been as impactful as the more divisive, yet attention grabbing protests in the NFL. However, for NBA players, the conversation was much more than just deciding what to do during the national anthem; their attention was focused on how they could affect material changes in society.

Going “Past the Gestures”: Players Emphasize Community-Building. When training camp began, the early comments from two of the NBA’s most influential voices were telling of how NBA players would approach the protest controversy. The Cavaliers’ James put to rest any speculation by announcing that he would stand for the national anthem. “That’s who I am, that’s what I believe in. But that doesn’t mean I don’t respect and don’t agree with what Colin Kaepernick is doing” (Withers, 2016). Instead of a symbolic gesture, James said he planned to make a difference through his foundation by helping the youth in his hometown of Akron, Ohio:

I feel like I’m doing all I can do — and more — to be in my community, to give back to my community, to lend my hand with my foundation with all the kids and just letting them know that there is a brighter tomorrow...  
(Withers, 2016)

Like his close friend James, the Bulls’ Wade also returned to his hometown team in-large part to be more involved in the community:

I think for me, things in this city that I’ve seen, we have a different kind of battle here in Chicago, a different focus. That’s what my focus is on. My focus is on this city and what am I capable of doing to help our youth in this city in a bigger way. That’s where my focus is. But what [Kaepernick] is doing is great because it’s what he wants to do, it’s what he believes in and he’s using his voice for that cause. (Cowley, 2016)

Thus, both James and Wade were quick to acknowledge Kaepernick for his conversation-stirring protest. Nonetheless, the two NBA stars felt as if being involved in their communities, not doubling-down on divisive protesting, was the best way to effect change.

Anthony Davis of the New Orleans Pelicans was more deliberate when he addressed the subject of protests. “Actions speak louder than words,” the forward said.

He continued:

You can say whatever, but if you don't do anything to prove that you actually doing what you're speaking it means nothing. For me, it's all about here in the communities no matter where it is New Orleans, Chicago wherever it is. I'm just trying to start there, doing stuff in this communities to help the kids and get them away from things going on. (Reid, 2016)

From Beal's perspective, protests could only accomplish so much; the next step would involve the work that players did in their communities. “We have to get involved with the community,” the 23-year-old Wizards guard said, before elaborating further,

We have to do some outreach. Whether it's meeting up with the police, bringing everybody together for a community basketball game or something. The smallest thing, it matters. We can't just do the protest thing and not have any action behind it. (Michael, 2016)

Summarizing this perspective, the Knicks' Anthony said, “I'm past the gestures... It's all about creating things now and putting things in motion” (Beck & Abrams, 2016).

Echoing the language of the league once again, the players reinforced their desire to affect change through their work in the community. For instance, the statement says specifically that the league and the players association were developing “substantive ways” for both parties to “take meaningful action.” Although, as the statement references, many players were already taking part in community-building efforts aimed at building the bonds between police officers and the black community. In August, just before the

USA men's basketball team traveled to Brazil for the summer Olympics, Anthony organized a roundtable conversation in Los Angeles between athletes, police, community leaders and activists (Begley, 2016). Wade had Miami police officers join him during his annual youth bike ride (Winderman, 2016). And Cousins organized a panel at his annual youth basketball camp in his hometown of Mobile, Alabama that featured police officers and community leaders (Furillo, 2016).

While the players had taken it upon themselves to engage in productive social change initiatives, by doing so, they also led the NBA to adopt this approach through the league's social responsibility platform, *NBA Cares*. For instance, former NBA All-Stars and police officers came together for "The NBA Legends Shooting for Peace" basketball game ("Former NBA Stars," 2016). Members of the Hawks staff completed multiple community service projects in the Atlanta area as part of Unity Day, and that evening, the Hawks played a "Unity Game" against the Cavaliers ("Hawks Announce," 2016).

The Bulls organized a basketball tournament and panel between law enforcement officers and a local mentoring agency for young men ("Bulls Host," 2016). The Pelicans hosted teenagers for a forum on the relationship between police officers and minorities, and the Lakers opened their practice facility to local youth and police officers to play basketball each Saturday in November (Eichenhofer, 2016; Medina, 2016). The Memphis Grizzlies launched the Police Athletic League, a program that tutors law enforcement officers to become youth sports coaches, made possible by a \$1 million donation from star player Mike Conley Jr (Sheffield, 2016). The league even produced a commercial, "Together," which featured Wade, Korver, Paul and Anthony addressing the divide in communities throughout the country ("Dwayne Wade, Chris Paul, 2016).

In late October, just before the tip-off of the NBA Regular Season, it became more apparent that arguably the most progressive American sports league was taking a far less controversial approach to the issues of protest and racial discrimination. Comments from league officials specifically highlighted the NBA's community relations-focused approach. Kathy Behrens, the NBA's president of social responsibility and player programs, said the conversation about protests had become "a little bit of a distraction," because the league was "focused on being meaningfully engaged" in the community (Beck & Abrams, 2016). When Silver finally addressed the national anthem issue for the first time since the initial joint statement a month prior, he emphasized that standing for the ceremony was the "appropriate thing to do" and that it was his "hope" that players would continue to once the regular season started (Youngmisuk, 2016). He continued,

We have had very constructive discussions ... about meaningful action that we can take collectively in our communities to help build trust, whether between police officers and members of the community looking for constructive ways to address racial injustice, economic injustice. I am very proud with the relationship we have built with the union, with the players on these issues. My expectation is that we'll see into the regular season more of what we have seen in the preseason, which is a sense of, let's deal directly with these important issues. (Youngmisuk, 2016).

Thus, at a time when race relations divided America, the NBA and its players decided to preach unity, focusing their collective attention not on the anthem, but on how they could affect "substantive change" in society. Summarizing this stance, *Bleacher Report's* Howard Beck and Jonathan Abrams (2016) write, "While the NFL's Colin Kaepernick and other athletes are using the national anthem to make a stand for social justice, NBA players are already pursuing a different path: action over symbolism."

## Discussion

As this analysis shows, NBA players were able to engage in activism without much pressure from the league, in large part, because the NBA had already built its reputation as a progressive organization. Hence, the players relied on the NBA's reputation to advance their message. Still, the fact that the NBA did not take a hardline stance ahead of the player demonstrations, given the league's long-held policy regarding the anthem, seems to suggest that the players' recent history of activism helped them consolidate a considerable amount of influence with the league. Just by releasing the statement and seeking out players' opinions, the league indirectly provided evidence of the power held by players. Consider that, once again, the players were engaging in activist behaviors in the most visible context: on NBA floors. After the "I Can't Breathe" protests, Commissioner Silver explicitly stated that he did not want the players "to become billboards" at games to advance "their political standpoints," yet, only two years later, he was seeking players' advice on a highly political issue ("NBA Commissioner," n.d.).

The collaboration with the league office suggests the players were actually engaging in something approximating the ideal of two-way symmetrical communication. That is, the two themes of unity and material change echoed the message put forth by Commissioner Silver and the players association head Roberts. For instance, many players spoke about the need to be unified; this was a common thread throughout the statement, which multiple times stressed the need to "come together." Moreover, players emphasized the need to affect change by their efforts in the community, which mirrors the statement's emphasis on taking "meaningful action" to make a "real difference." The



players also engaged in apparent two-way symmetrical behaviors through their demonstrations. The league presumably would have rather steered clear of any possible controversy so to protect its corporate sponsorship. The player demonstrations, therefore, were accommodating to the league's desire. Excellence Theory would, however, provide little room for recognizing the players' activism as productive, especially because this theory sees activists as "outsiders" who represent a "major problem for organizations" that they seek to "exert control over" (L. A. Grunig, 1992, pp. 504, 522). So, the blind spot that these protests reveal in Excellence Theory is how activism from inside the organization can be productive, representing a positive for organizations that are willing to listen to and work with organizational members who identify problems and seek to change them.

While there is no way to know for certain if the protests directly affected the economic or social legitimacy of the NBA, an early indication of viewership ratings suggest fans were not deterred from watching games after the league-wide demonstrations that took place before pre-season games. In comparison to the previous year, the NBA's television ratings saw an eight percent increase on opening night of the regular season, the highest number over last four seasons (Krawczynski, 2017).

Conversely, The NFL experienced sharp viewership declines, and three major reasons were given to explain this decline: the heightened attention given to the presidential race; the decrease in cable subscriptions; and the national anthem protests ("ESPN," 2016).

In an internal memo released to NFL teams, the league office attributed the ratings decline to the presidential race, while also suggesting that there was no evidence supporting the protests' connection to the ratings decline (Rovell, 2016). In surveys taken

during the season's opening months, however, some NFL fans did attach the ratings decline with players' protests.

According to a *Rasmussen* poll conducted between October 2-3<sup>rd</sup>, for example, thirty-two percent of adults said they were less likely to watch NFL games as a result of the protests (McCarthy, 2016). A *Yahoo Sports* poll taken two weeks later found that twenty-nine percent of respondents were watching less football than the previous season; of this faction, forty-percent identified the protests as the reason they were tuning out (Busbee, 2016). Finally, a poll conducted by Seton Hall at the end of October found that fifty-six percent of NFL fans believed the ratings declines were due to the protests ("Poll: Fans Believe," 2016). While these studies are limited to only a snapshot in time and lack the ability to gauge NFL viewer's real viewing habits, the collection of polls and surveys do suggest that a large faction of viewers held a negative perception of the protests.

Thus, the NBA's reaction to the national anthem protests in the NFL reveals how activists might work within organizations to promote social change while still maintaining the legitimacy of the organization. As such, this case study questions Excellence Theory's conceptualization of activists as problematic "outsiders" who represent a threat to organization.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have outlined how NBA players acted as internal activists who used strategies and tactics common to public relations when responding to the anthem protests in the NFL. Therefore, this study adds to the body of critical public relations literature by looking at how professional athletes as internal activists practice public relations. Hence, my study supports previous work on activists as internal members of the organizations (Curtin, 2016; McCown, 2007; Toledano, 2016). Further, my study challenges previous some of the assumptions of activists held by critical scholars. In what follows, I will outline some of the practical and theoretical implications of this study, and offer some limitations, before concluding.

### Implications

Excellence theory has received much criticism in public relations scholarship for privileging organizational interests over the interests of activists. Contrary to the pro-corporate and anti-activist biases of Excellence Theory, this thesis reveals how internal activists- in this case NBA players- actually approach something like Grunig and Hunt's ideal of two-way symmetrical communication by agitating for social change while at the same time improving their organization's public legitimacy. Contrary to Excellence Theory's treatment of activists as troublesome "outsiders," this thesis suggests that activists may work within organizations to promote social change while also attending to concerns for organizational stability, profitability, and popular reputation.

This case study also reveals that internal activists might be uniquely empowered, unlike the relatively disadvantaged activists that public relations scholars have previously studied (Karlberg, 1996; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Stokes & Rubin, 2010). This is especially true for NBA players, who have a wealth of resources; they have large sums of capital, access to media, and representation through the NBPA. In this specific case, the players used the media to get their message out and NBPA Roberts communicated the players' interests to Commissioner Silver.

Internal activists may especially take advantage of intangible sources of power. Curtin (2016) notes internal activists often use the reputation of the organization as an intangible resource. She advises considering power in context "as a characteristic of relational webs and not as an essentialist quality of organizations or of resources" (p. 30). As internal activists, NBA players also used two intangible resources to their advantage: their celebrity and the reputation of the NBA as a progressive social organization. As I outlined in chapter three, the players built influence with the league from their position as celebrities to bring attention to perceived racial injustices after the deaths of Martin and Garner. The NBA has since been less restrictive of players addressing social issues that are important to them.

Finally, as the NFL protests show, activism can bring with it serious fiscal ramifications. For his actions, *Time Magazine* named Kaepernick among the 100 Most Influential People (Harbaugh, 2017). However, the 49ers released Kaepernick after the season, and as of this writing, he has yet to be signed by another NFL team. The *Washington Post's* Kevin Blackstone (2017) is among a chorus of people who contend the NFL has effectively "blackballed" Kaepernick. His former college teammate,

Brandon Marshall, also lost sponsorship deals with Academy Federal Credit Union and Century Link, with both companies citing his protest in their statements (Jhabvala, 2016a; Jhabvala, 2016b).

For athletes who decide to engage in activism, Gill (2016) advises against doing so while in uniform, given that this is not an expected custom in most jobs. Moreover, he believes athletes should forgo token activism:

Professional athletes should avoid token activism, which might include an in-game gesture such as a name or slogan written on their uniform. Given the frequency, and apparent novelty, of token sports activism these gestures are likely to have a trivial impact at best. (p. 408)

The findings from this study suggest two important implications for players. First, activist behaviors, on or off-the-field, might be more powerful when they are reflective of a players' existing interests. That is, when players decide to speak out on an issue, their statements gain greater power when connected with their own relevant off-the-field activism, for instance, through charity work, community-building projects, or political engagement. Second, star players provide significant momentum and credibility when they lead activist efforts, as illustrated in the three cases I have examined here. Star athletes generate significant revenue for sports leagues, which often leads to greater amounts of influence with league officials. To gain power relative to the organization, public relations scholars recommend that activists build coalitions (Curtin, 2016; Sommerfeldt, 2012). Gaining the support of some of the star athletes in a given league would seem to provide substantial momentum behind activist causes.

It is important to make note a few practical limitations to this study. First, time was a benefit for the NBA, allowing them to implement a pro-active strategy ahead of the season, a benefit that was not provided to the NFL. From a league-office perspective, the

protests put the NFL into crisis mode, whereas for the NBA, it was less an issue of crisis management than it was issue management.

In addition, the NBA and NFL have two distinctly different fan-bases. As I alluded to earlier, the majority of NFL fans are older white men, and NFL fans skew decidedly conservative (Anzilotti, 2016; Simmons, 2007). Conversely, the NBA is the only major U. S. sports league where black fans (forty-five percent) outnumber white fans, and further, the league has the youngest audience by far; forty-five percent of all fans are under the age of thirty-five (Anzilotti, 2016). Thus, this contextual information may explain why the polarization in the NFL may have been so strong, as well as why the NBA and its players were able to navigate this issue without much trepidation.

Finally, more studies on internal activist publics are needed. To better understand how internal activism takes place in professional sports, future studies might take into consideration the demographic factors outlined above. A similar study such as the one I have presented here might investigate how black players are navigating the complexities of internal activism in the NFL. Doing so could provide key insight into how NFL players might gain power similar to what NBA players now possess.

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