QUEERING AGENDA BUILDING: LGBT ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS AND STRATEGIC INFORMATION FLOW THROUGH MULTIPLE MEDIA PLATFORMS

Joseph M. Cabosky

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Media and Journalism

Chapel Hill
2015

Approved by:
Rhonda Gibson
Lois Boynton
Adam Saffer
Patricia Parker
Kenneth Andrews
ABSTRACT

Joseph M. Cabosky: Queering agenda building: LGBT advocacy organizations and strategic information flow through multiple media platforms
(Under the direction of Dr. Rhonda Gibson)

Mass communication agenda building literature has examined how story topics and frames develop into media coverage. This dissertation studied two aspects of agenda building that remain under explored. First, while agenda building and agenda setting were developed during days of top-down mass media, today’s media environment can be perceived as, in the words of Andrew Chadwick, a hybrid media system. This system has many interacting players, platforms and opinion leaders, each with access to several media channels and outlets. While scholarship has looked at how much influence older forms of information subsidies, such as press releases, or newer forms, such as Tweets, have on media coverage and corresponding public attention, few studies have looked at how all of these forms of materials and media outlets are interacting with each other.

Second, agenda building literature rarely looks at how minority or niche media outlets and audiences discuss a topic. This study compared coverage of an LGBT-themed case study – openly gay athlete Michael Sam’s journey into professional football – to see how the story was built and shaped across mainstream news media, queer media, LGBT advocacy organizations and social media. This study used a qualitative content analysis of multiple outlets and organizations from each of these media and organizational...
categories, coupled with in-depth interviews with individuals associated with Michael Sam’s journey, or the LGBT sports movement more broadly.

Results showed that previous conceptualizations of unidirectional information flow developed in mass media days are no longer a reality. Many different outlets, organizations and individuals shaped coverage of Michael Sam, each having their own voice at various points in the story. Theorizations of agenda building therefore need to take account of the modern media system’s diverse landscape. Findings also indicated unique dynamics within queer media and LGBT advocacy organizations, demonstrating how scholars need to fully appreciate the variance that can take place across media coverage, advocacy outlets, and audiences.

The study concludes with recommendations for future academic and professional work in this area. First, it suggests that the media system is less of a unidirectional wave and more of an interacting and rippling pond. Second, scholars need to study more than just older or newer types of information subsidies to appreciate all that is affecting broader story flow. Findings showed that, to make broader claims about who influences a story’s development, many individuals, outlets and organizations need to be examined holistically. Third, it calls for a better appreciation of non-news media and non-media relations factors that can affect a story or topic. Fourth, future scholars must think critically when applying the term agenda at all, as findings showed that mainstream news coverage often varied not only from queer coverage and audience or organizational discussion, but also other mainstream news coverage. The study ends with critical and reflexive thought on how scholars and professionals may need to better appreciate the dynamics of power that have led to the field’s current understanding of agenda building.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Upon completion of this dissertation, I would like to take the time to thank the people who helped make this study possible.

To my wonderful committee: To Dr. Rhonda Gibson, who gave countless hours to this study. You have always kept me organized and focused, and your grammar teaching abilities are better than a divine biscuit. Most importantly, you have always been a good mentor and friend. To Dr. Lois Boynton, who has always been there for me, on good days, bad days, and even the occasional Diet Sunkist Saturday. To Dr. Adam Saffer, who has shared so much knowledge with me in the little time we have known each other. I look forward to working with you for years to come, as a colleague and a friend. To Dr. Andy Andrews, who has always been so supportive of us Media School folks; you are simply one of the nicest and most helpful academic mentors I’ve had. And to Dr. Pat Parker, who has been there for me from the beginning. You have always pushed me to be me, and I can think of few compliments better than that.

To the Media and Journalism School faculty and staff: To Dr. Riffe, who deserves every mentor award ever created. Dr. Riffe has been a mentor to me and all of my colleagues, teaching us a great deal about academia, life outside of the building, friendship and family…and the importance of blending all of those things. To Dr. Joe Bob Hester, who made this data collection possible, and to whose smile and laugh always brighten my day. Roots for years to come! To Dr. Daniel Kriess, who has long been a
helpful mentor and advisor; Daniel was essential at getting this project off the ground, and I’m always looking forward to hearing his thoughts and feedback. To the rest of the faculty: too many to be named, but whose smiles, advice, wisdom, and collegiality make this building the best place to work. To the J-School staff: Jill and Robin, who have made the last few months a joy, Linda, who is always there to offer a smile, Rachel, who often makes it feel like I have a No. 1 fan, Dean Susan King, who has cheered me on, Stephanie, who makes our whole building run with her research know-how and endless kitten videos that are always perfect for any given day…and the countless others.

To my great colleagues and friends: Meghan Sobel, whose nom-noms, smiles, trampolining, and Fifty Shades of Grey watching has made these last few years so wonderful. You’re a true friend for life. To Karen, who has wonderfully listened whenever I had life coaching advice about cars, credit cards or travels – and who has been there to offer afternoon chats in the cat-nap sun. To Diane, for her laugh, support and travel companionship. To Dave, for being my office mate who left too soon! To Suzzanah, for our lunchtime strolls. To Laura, my buddy! To the other Laura, my other buddy! To Elyse, for our chats – they’re one of a kind. To Brooks, for having so many clothing lines named after him…and for his friendship, which is so true, honest and sincere. To Jesse, for teaching me New Zeland referee gestures. To Stephanie, for your constant smiles. To Marshelle, Emily, and all the ‘ole PR gang – you ladies are simply awesome. And to Jeanette, Justin, Lu, and all the other wonderful people.

Missy, Miranda, Jeff, Judy, Mal, Stevie, and Gump. To Melody and Tom, Ben and Becky. To Jessie and Eric. I love you guys!

But most of all, to Seth and Sherri Smith. Seth, you are the love of my life. You have seen me through this journey more than anyone. You have put up with my long nights and weekends, my bad days, and my often monotone voice. You have the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever met, and I’m so glad to have you in my life. To Sherri, who was the best mother-in-law anyone could have ever had. You were a ray of sunshine, and had such a contagious laugh. We all think of you everyday. Until the end, you were there for everyone in your family. And you have taught me the value of making the most of the life we have. But, most of all, I am forever indebted to you as, without you, there would be no Seth. And yet, Sherri, I know that you’re still here…because your warmth, your kindness will always live on in your wonderful son, Seth. May you always Rest in Peace.

And so, to all of you, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.
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INTRODUCTION

By the time Saturday comes around in the NFL draft, the high-priced first-round contracts have long faded. The hype of ESPN’s television ratings has dissipated. Teams are closing in on their last pick in hopes of grabbing a last-minute gem that remains in the rough before packing it in until the next year’s draft. But late on Saturday, May 10th, 2014, the draft obtained far more fanfare than one would normally see at such a point in the process. Deep into the last round, the St. Louis Rams had selected Michael Sam as their final pick. And with selection 249 out of 256 possible slots, Sam became the first openly gay player to ever be drafted into the NFL. Television screens, social media, and online news outlets erupted with the news to make Sam one of the largest sports media stories of 2014. Over the course of the year, Sam’s story ebbed and flowed across media platforms. There was nearly unanimous news media praise upon his public coming out in February 2014. But, by the close of the year, mainstream media frames that argued Sam was a distraction or perhaps simply not a good enough athlete dominated his narrative. Meanwhile, many queer media outlets and audiences complained that these frames were cover for broader issues of league and/or media homophobia. The examination of how Sam’s story was shaped by a complex and interacting system of media outlets, organizations and audiences is the focus of the present study.
Exploring information flow in a hybrid media system

A case such as the Sam story challenges the mass media theories of agenda building and agenda setting. Developed during a top-down mass media world, agenda setting was conceived by examining how mainstream media organizations such as *The New York Times* reportedly set the agenda of public discussion and thought (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory of agenda building, developed in the political science literature (Cobb & Elder, 1971), was adopted by communication scholars who explored how stories, and their attributes, were built into the news media, focusing on the relationship between strategic organizational actors and their interactions with mainstream news outlets (see Turk, 1985, 1986). Yet, the various media outlets involved in telling the Sam story, both mainstream and niche, traditional and new, coupled with their apparent interactions, question the fundamentals of these top-down mass media theories. Modern scholars have attempted to update these theories by examining how social media platforms such as Twitter may have an agenda-building or setting role (Vargo, Guo, McCombs & Shaw, 2014). But these methodological approaches commonly examine a singular media platform, essentially treating the flow of information as though it were unidirectional and reifying the role of the media outlet or platform under study. Furthermore, the Sam case represents an example of a story that may have varied content in niche media and queer-friendly social media pages, illustrating dynamics that go far beyond studies examining only outlets such as *The New York Times*.

This dissertation aims to offer a better understanding of how queer advocacy organizations are attempting to build topics and corresponding attributes into what Andrew Chadwick (2013) has called the hybrid media system. Due to the lack of research into queer\(^1\) organizations...
media, this dissertation will focus on these theories exclusively from a queer perspective. That said, based on this in-depth focus on a particular area of niche media, this dissertation hopes to allow for broader theory building that may be able to be more expansively applied to other niche or non-mainstream populations or media. Thus, this dissertation seeks to explore how the theories of agenda building and agenda setting may be functioning in a hybrid media world when applied to non-mainstream media or publics.

Chadwick (2013) argues that information flows through today’s media landscape in ways that are less linear than mass media or current digital media scholars may appreciate. He claims that studies need to go beyond looking exclusively at only older media channels (newspapers, television news, etc.) or newer media channels (social media, online platforms, etc.) without taking into account how they may be interacting with, and adapting to, one another. Rooted in a qualitative content analysis of mainstream as well as queer media, coupled with queer organizations’ strategic documents and social media pages, the current study examined how information about Michael Sam flowed through this hybrid media system. This study expanded upon Chadwick’s work by examining of how queer media are developing stories at the same time as mainstream media. Additionally, this study utilized a limited number of interviews with strategic communication actors and journalists who were involved in Sam’s journey to further illuminate behind-the-scenes strategies of how organizations are navigating this multi-platform media landscape.

Mass communication scholarship has often explored agenda building and agenda setting by using mass topics of analysis (i.e., “What is the most important issue facing the country today?”) (Coleman & McCombs 2007; Lasorsa & Wanta, 1990; McCombs, 2005; McCombs &

once used as a slur toward LGBT individuals, the term is now frequently considered a much more inclusive, and less binary, term than the use of LGBT.
Shaw, 1972) and mass methodological approaches such as broad public opinion surveys (Ader, 1995; Kiousis, 2005; Weaver, 1991; Wu & Coleman, 2009). These findings are then commonly compared with media coverage in mainstream media outlets, such as The New York Times (Ader, 1995; Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Kiousis, 2005, McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Winter & Eyal, 1981) or mass Twitter activity (Vargo, et al., 2014).

This study explored whether there were different patterns that emerged when examining topics across both mainstream and niche media outlets. For example, despite a wave of mass media coverage about same-sex marriage and the Supreme Court in 2013, a Pew (Brown, A., 2013) survey of LGBT Americans showed that the top priority for their community was not same-sex marriage but employment non-discrimination. Put simply, these data call into question the validity of traditional mass media research that has posited that topic salience is transferred from the mass media to the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; see Takeshita, 2006). Yet, it is likely of little question that the American mass media spent far more time discussing same-sex marriage than LGBT employment discrimination in recent years. Thus, examinations of mass media coverage and generalized public opinion surveys are likely failing to tell the whole story of how media content is flowing to, and interacting with, various publics. Additionally, by connecting the agenda-building literature with the sociology literature, this study hoped to better understand how queer organizations within the same movement may be strategically targeting media in similar or different ways, depending on the organization, the publics being targeted and the topic involved. Finally, this study explored whether there were differences in how the media source these organizations and their public relations materials, be they traditional press releases, web materials or social media output.
This dissertation is laid out as follows. Chapter One will speak to the realities of the current media system by laying out Andrew Chadwick’s (2013) arguments that the public currently lives in a hybrid media environment, composed of interacting flows between both newer and older media outlets. Chapter Two will discuss agenda building and agenda setting by examining the roots of the theories, their emergence into the digital world, and the current gaps in the literature based on methodological choices and a lack of scholarship in the area of minority publics. Chapter Three will review current knowledge about the relationship between advocacy organizations and the media, as well as insert the question of power and public relations into the dissertation. Chapter Four will explore this study’s research questions and methods, including a description of the qualitative content analysis and interview methods. This section will also describe the dissertation’s case study focus on Michael Sam, the first openly gay NFL player in history. Chapters Five through Nine describe the study’s findings, and Chapter Ten closes with a discussion of these findings, as well as the study’s theoretical developments and limitations.
CHAPTER I: Theorizing in a hybrid media system

When attempting to continually explore how media and communication theories are operating in an ever-changing world of new technologies and a diversifying American population, it is essential to understand how the media landscape is functioning. While this is an ongoing and always adapting reality, it is important to ask whether top-down mass media studies (Kiousis, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Vargo, et al., 2014) are actually representative of the modern media world. This chapter will examine Andrew Chadwick’s work, The Hybrid Media System (2013). Chadwick’s work established that the flow of information in the current media landscape is much more complex than some existing scholarship has found. While much scholarship continues to use methodological approaches that are limited to examinations of mainstream news outlets such as The New York Times (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Denham, 2014; Entman, 2004; Golan, 2006; Kiousis, 2004; Meraz, 2011), Chadwick’s work shows how these “older” news outlets no longer act as forces that universally control information flow. Chadwick’s work also demonstrates how the modern push toward analysis of singular social media platforms such as Twitter also fail to account for the interactions that are occurring between both newer and older forms of media. This section thus establishes the lens of the hybrid media landscape from which this study examined the theories of agenda building and agenda setting from a newer and older, as well as mainstream versus queer, media perspective.
Chadwick’s hybrid media system

In his 2013 book, sociologist scholar Andrew Chadwick argued that the current media system is a complex landscape of interacting flows, platforms, and media players, and he calls this a hybrid media system (2013). Chadwick’s arguments stem from the notion that the modern world is highly mediated, be it through traditional outlets of mass media, the use of one’s iPhone or Blackberry, or the applications used on one’s Samsung Galaxy Tablet. The core of his claim is that there are older and newer media outlets that are interacting in this complex system, ultimately mediating a flow of information (Chadwick, 2013). Older media entities include newspapers or television news outlets, broadcast or cable. This argument counters the work of Vargo, Guo, McCombs, and Shaw (2014), who still use cable news as an example of a newer media reality. Instead, Chadwick argues that newer outlets are media entities such as social media platforms, be it Twitter, Facebook, or Reddit, as well as media such as mobile applications.

Chadwick (2013) thus argues the media system is not an “either/or” (p. 14) reality where a study capturing only The New York Times or Twitter can fully inform scholarship about the contours of the media world. In response to this split in research that often continues to exclusively use older media or newer media as the subject of analysis, Chadwick stated, “too often the scholars in these two camps have talked past each other” (p. 13). Instead, Chadwick argues that a more “holistic approach” (p. 13) is needed where scholars better explore not only the interacting web of these media outlets but also the journalists, politicians, non-passive audience, or other situational actors involved.

Be it diffused television ratings, polarized political news outlets, or the diversity of technology in the current day, many scholars have spoken about the effects of fragmentation...
(Arceneaux & Johnson, 2010; Muddiman, Stroud, & McCombs, 2014; Nelson-Field & Riebe, 2011; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). For example, does the polarization of Fox News and MSNBC lead to more partisan audiences? A Pew (Avlon, 2014) study found that as media outlets have grown more partisan, so too have American political attitudes. Yet, Chadwick (2013) argues that hybridity includes not only the aforementioned notions of integration but also involves these processes of fragmentation. A hybrid media system thus not only includes interactions but also a lack of interactions that may be associated with such modern fragmentation (Chadwick, 2013).

So, if Fox News is interacting with an individual, then a lack of interaction by that individual with The New York Times or MSNBC may also play a role. Many players, outlets and technologies have a role in this always changing system, including, in this example, inter-media effects, the involvement of sources behind the coverage, the reaction of other outlets, and the response from Fox News viewers.

To develop his claims, Chadwick (2013) utilized media ethnography and interviews with key actors who were associated with a set of specific cases. He mapped how information related to political issues in the United States and the United Kingdom flowed through this hybrid media system. For example, he explored how the reaction to the United Kingdom’s first prime ministerial debate unfolded, finding that many factors played a role. The timing of the debates on Thursday evenings led to a perfectly queued development of the story between the event and the elite Sunday talk shows. Nearly instant and not-so scientific snap polls of viewer feedback online resulted in their own form of feedback that shaped debate reaction. Furthermore, live feedback was captured by older elite sources that used focus groups while newer social media outlets played their own role as both elites and the voting public gave their reactions during and after the debate on Facebook and Twitter. Chadwick’s case illustration thus demonstrated how the
development of stories in the modern media system incorporate an ever-dynamic mix of media platforms and players, both newer and older, elite and of the general public.

This work complements Dave Karpf’s (2012) recent conceptual developments related to how activist organizations are operating in current media environments. Karpf looked at the interplay of older legacy organizations, those long-standing and often large organizations commonly centered in Washington, D.C., that have high overhead costs, against the routines of newer activist organizations such as Move On and other digitally inclined organizations that often lack physically located centers (Karpf, 2012). From an organizational perspective, Karpf found a similar type of hybridity and continual interaction and adaptation. He noted that each organization had its role in the issue and advocacy process, as well as variations in the flow of power dynamics. While legacy organizations often have resources, strong and long-lasting relationships, and almost brand-like reputations, many of these newer digital organizations had nimbleness, adaptability, and the ability to quickly mobilize and expand their number of followers through online petitions and similar means (Karpf, 2012).

Chapter 1 conclusion

By coupling the work of these scholars, a path forward emerges that this study attempted to address. From a media perspective, Chadwick’s work develops conceptualizations of a media setting that is constantly flowing and interacting, offering a base from which to explore how agenda building and agenda setting are operating in this landscape. While Chadwick touched on the antecedents to this content with some examination into the strategic organizations behind such flow, his cases generally offered a mass view of this hybridity, such as the examination of
the prime ministerial debates. In addition to applying his findings to these mass communication theories, questions also develop about how this hybrid landscape operates within queer media and when relating to issues of queer concern. From an organizational perspective, Karpf (2012) examined organizations largely based on their interactions with technology but also found a hybridity in how both newer and older organizations are adapting to changing realities. Additional questions remain about how these organizations attempt to navigate diverse media realities to communicate with their target publics.

The work of Chadwick (2013) and Karpf (2012) establishes a media and organizational reality that is perhaps more complex than other studies have so far established. While some studies continue to examine media from the perspective of singular media outlets or unidirectional media platforms, the conceptualization of a hybrid media world that is ever adapting with multi-directional flows and battles between powerful actors and counter responses of power by other actors illustrates a world that remains underexplored. The next chapter will address the foundations of agenda building and agenda setting while also exploring how the hybrid media world creates potentially problematic questions that need to be addressed.
CHAPTER II: Problematizing agenda building and agenda setting

As illustrated in Chapter One, Chadwick’s (2013) work in developing the notion of a hybrid media system was largely centered by his explorations into how information flowed through a mixed-media environment that ranged from older mass communication outlets such as newspapers to flows created by new media outlets such as social media platforms. Though not the primary goal of Chadwick’s arguments, his findings also illustrate realities that may challenge traditional claims found in the mass communication and public relations literature relating to the theories of agenda building and agenda setting. In brief, agenda building examines how organizations may be able to build and shape the media agenda while inter-media agenda building theorizes how media players are able to shape media coverage among other media entities. Agenda setting stems from an effects perspective, suggesting that the media are able to have an effect on what the public thinks about.

This chapter will discuss how these theories initially developed in the 1970s and 1980s, a time of mass, top-down, mainstream media (Cobb & Elder, 1972; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). While scholars have recently tested these theories from the perspective of more modern digital media platforms (Jungherr, 2014; Parmelee, 2013; Vargo, et al., 2014), the literature so far remains limited to scholarship that largely treats the current media environment as an “either/or” reality (Chadwick, 2013, p. 14). Finally, this section will also address how these theories may suffer from more systemic problems that may have long underappreciated the perspective of minority or niche audiences or media outlets.
**Agenda building: Political science and public policy lineage**

Agenda-building theory developed among political science and public policy scholars at the start of the 1970s. Cobb and Elder (1972) developed the theory using a political economy rationale, extending from Walter Lippmann’s (1922) arguments decades before that claimed the world was simply too large a place to deliberate all issues of a given time. Instead, Lippmann reasoned that society only advances certain issues for public and policy debate. Adopting this theoretical lineage, Cobb and Elder’s (1972) notions of agenda building largely referred to what issues were *built* onto the policy agenda, *building* referring to how and why issues were strategically promoted or adopted by policy makers. The policy agenda, meaning issues that were formally being debated and addressed by the nation’s policy makers such as Congress, was characterized as the formal agenda. Relatedly, the scholars reasoned that there was also a public agenda, that being issues of concern for the general public. Thus, Cobb and Elder were interested in how these issues became issues at all, especially as they related to concerns of public policy.

Before transitioning to how these theoretical underpinnings were then adopted by mass communication scholars, it is important to highlight that, even in these initial public policy formations of agenda building, Cobb and Elder’s (1972) establishing work demonstrates how application of agenda building to a mass approach can quickly become problematic. Even when agenda building was only applying to the public policy process, their work highlights how conceptualizations of a single agenda, and thus a universal or singular agenda building process, was never in existence.
Agenda building: Adoption and development by media scholars

The connection of agenda building to communication scholarship arguably stems from the development of a related mass communication theory, agenda setting. McCombs and Shaw (1972) published their seminal work developing agenda-setting theory by making the theoretical claim that media have an important role in being able to set public discussion about issues. Thus, what is salient on the media agenda, they argued, could be transferred over to the public agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Additional work of media scholars in the 1970s started to build bridges to agenda-building theory.

For example, Kaid (1976) found an initial connection between political campaign press releases and news coverage. Kaid (1976) showed that journalists often copied campaign publicity materials verbatim, especially if the material was related to non-ideological issues such as event information and personal background representations. Additionally, Hale’s (1978) work showed a relationship between the length of press releases and the length of news stories. These links between a public relations practitioner’s ability to build an agenda in the news was further developed by the ethnographic journalism studies of Gans (1979) and Tuchmann (1978). These scholars found that the news-making process was heavily reliant on, and shaped by, PR practitioners. Through their ethnographic observations, they found sources had strong influence on topic coverage. For example, they found a heavy reliance on official and elite sources that were perceived to be most credible. These works laid the backdrop for the official development of these concepts into the scholarly public relations literature of the 1980s.

Like the work of Cobb and Elder (1972), these initial findings relating to agenda building in the media realm once again demonstrated how application of the theory requires complexity that goes beyond merely the transfer of a singular issue between an organization and media
(agenda building) or between media and a homogenous mass audience (agenda setting). Instead, scholarship that has examined impacts on the news-making process from a media sociology perspective (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013) has illustrated how variables such as word length (Hale, 1978), sourcing, journalistic practices, use of quotes, and portrayed attributes (Gans, 1979; Tuchmann, 1978) may complicate this flow of information through the media, both from an agenda building and agenda setting perspective. They also foreshadowed the need for scholarship to better understand the antecedent (Gandy, 1982), that being the organizations or individuals potentially shaping this news-content process.

Expansion of agenda building into public relations scholarship

While the scholarship of the 1970s demonstrated hints at a link between a public relations practitioner’s ability to build and shape the media agenda, it was Gandy’s (1982) work that developed the often-cited concept of information subsidies, a key employment task for media relations practitioners. Information subsidy refers to practices by public relations practitioners that allow for journalists and news agencies to obtain information at a subsidized price (Gandy, 1982). In other words, it is an argument that information itself is a commodity (Gandy, 1982). News organizations, businesses that are in need of this commodity that is information, face supply-and-demand realities (Gandy, 1982). Based on issues such as cost, journalist routines, and news cycles, Gandy argued that news organizations were highly reliant on story topics, attributes, and sourcing supplied to them through information subsidies. An information subsidy can more specifically be conceptualized as information materials created by organizations, such as press releases or press conferences (Gandy, 1982). It can also include less publicly visible practices such as phone calls, or now emails or social media activity, between organizations and
media individuals. Gandy’s (1982) work also struck a critical tone, highlighting the ability for more powerful and elite organizations to shape media content.

Adopting Gandy’s notions of information subsidies, Turk (1985; 1986) fully applied these concepts into the public relations literature. Using content analysis of government documents and speeches, Turk examined the similarity between information subsidies supplied by government bodies and resulting news coverage. In her earlier work, she examined how state agencies in Louisiana were able to build topics into the news agenda through their news releases and official events (Turk, 1985; 1986). Additionally, she tracked how agency supplied quotes and related information could shape the coverage from a source and attribute perspective (Turk, 1985; 1986). She found that public information officers (PIOs) were highly influential at obtaining desired coverage (Turk, 1985; 1986). Still, she argued that, while PIOs were not always able to obtain coverage from their efforts, few stories were developed about the agencies from other sources, highlighting the importance of the government’s ability to build a media agenda about their agencies (Turk, 1985, 1986). Other scholars during this era, such as Weaver and Elliott (1985), accordingly found similarities between what was provided through information subsidies and what resulted in news coverage. These studies illuminate the role of the organization in the agenda-building process. Furthermore, while Turk’s (1985, 1986) work used the government as the organization under review, work of scholars such as Curtin and Rodenbaugh (2001) have shown how an advocacy group has an ability to be a player in this creation and shaping of media content.

The agenda-setting work of the 1970s demonstrated a relationship between media coverage and audience thinking, and the media agenda-building scholarship of the 1980s further developed the role of organizational players as being potentially important antecedents to this
process. Over the last two decades, many public relations scholars have continued to show
correlational relationships between information subsidies and news coverage (Fahmy, Wanta,
Johnson & Zhang, 2011; Kim, Xiang & Kiousis, 2011; Kiousis, Mitrook, Wu & Seltzer, 2006;
Kiousis, Popescu & Mitrook, 2007; Ragas, 2012; Ragas, Kim & Kiousis, 2011), yet many
questions remain when applying these theories to Chadwick’s hybrid media system or when
considering niche publics or the role of alternative media outlets. This occurs as studies still
often test agenda building by comparing press releases with coverage in mainstream media
outlets, such as *The New York Times*. Additionally, this methodological approach then
commonly tests agenda setting by comparing the media and organizational agenda with the
public agenda by using a comparative mass public survey (Kim et al., 2011; Kiousis, et al., 2006;
Kiousis, et al., 2007; Soroka, 2002). Because this common approach analyzes content or effects
at three different stages, that being the organization (through press releases in these studies),
media coverage (through mainstream news coverage), and the audience (through mass public
opinion surveys), I will address the current literature’s limitations by accordingly reviewing each
of these three areas separately.

**Theoretical gaps: Organizations, information subsidies and agenda building**

Gandy (1982), Turk (1985; 1986), and others (Curtin, 1999) have shown that information
subsidies include tactics beyond press releases or speeches. For example, in a study of news
coverage about a hostile corporate takeover, scholars found that the more sympathetic company
that was being taken over received more favorable media coverage than did the hostile actor
(Ohl, Pincus, Rimmer & Harrison, 1995). The scholars noted how qualitative differences such as
the relationship between journalist and public relations practitioner mattered as the company
facing the takeover had a highly accessible staff available to the journalists, thus affecting coverage (Ohl, et al, 1995).

Curtin’s (1999) well-cited survey of and interviews with journalists revealed more nuanced relationships between PR practitioners and journalists. While her survey results showed that journalists self-reported little use of PR materials, upon interviewing those journalists, she found that use of such resources was much more prevalent than the survey data showed. While journalists admitted they rarely included entire selections of press releases or other information subsidy materials in their coverage, they admitted that such resources often sparked story ideas, served as news filler, or were used to supply quotes and information (Curtin, 1999). Additionally, she found that some organizations, such as non-profits, were quite successful at obtaining coverage because of their perceived lack of ideological or capital-based motivational interests. Curtin’s (1999) work also highlighted how other qualitative differences such as pre-existing relationships between practitioner and journalist were also critical as journalists could contact trusted professionals to supply information or clarification. Thus, while Chadwick calls for a more holistic review of media platforms that may all be playing a role in the development of media coverage, future agenda-building scholarship may also be able to review organizational agenda-building tactics more holistically to better understand the relationship between organizational strategies and media coverage.

**Theoretical gaps: How to conceptualize media in agenda building**

Consistent with Chadwick’s (2013) critiques, scholarship that has used *The New York Times*, the *CBS Evening News* and related mainstream media outlets to act as a representative source of a media agenda may no longer fully speak to the modern media landscape. To defend
this selection, the notion of inter-media agenda building becomes applicable (Reese & Danielian, 1989). Inter-media agenda building refers to the ability of media to build and influence the coverage and content of other media outlets (Reese & Danielian, 1989). In the mass-media era, Reese and Danielian (1989) found that *The New York Times* set the media agenda for other media outlets. If *The New York Times* covered a topic, then it would drive coverage in other media outlets around the country (Reese & Danielian, 1989). Yet since that seminal study, newspaper employment is down by a third (Lee & Smith, 2015), and no modern television news program frequently obtains more than a few percentage points of the American viewing audience at any given time (Nielsen.com/us/en/top10s.html).

From an agenda-setting perspective, McCombs and Shaw and a new wave of scholars (Guo, 2013; Shaw & Weaver, 2014; Vargo, et al., 2014) have attempted to modernize conceptualizations of the theory to meet the demand of these mixed media and fragmented realities. More recently, they have been developing the notion of agenda melding (Shaw & Weaver, 2014), a theory that posits audiences will find like-minded people – and media — to associate with (Vargo, et al., 2014). This then also includes the ability to select media that associate well with one’s worldview, such as a conservative choosing to watch *Fox News* or a liberal watching *MSNBC* (Shaw & Weaver, 2014; Vargo, et al., 2014). Their recent scholarship thus argues that media still have an agenda-setting effect but that it is only setting the agenda of those who are of a like mind and are actually consuming it (Vargo, et al, 2014). Simply put, issue and attribute salience can still be transferred from *Fox News* to a *Fox News* viewer, though it may be different than what is being transferred between *MSNBC* and one of its viewers (Vargo, et al., 2014). While these studies have illuminated how agenda-setting effects are indeed more
fragmented in the modern day, their examination of data at the macro level leaves questions about minority or niche media and audience agendas still left unexplored.

For example, a Pew (Hitlin, Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2013) study found vastly different patterns in how media outlets covered the same-sex marriage debate during the 2013 Supreme Court ruling on the matter. The study examined coverage across four media platforms, including a news media composite of mainstream coverage (both liberal and conservative), coverage from *The Huffington Post* (a liberal online outlet), a composite of LGBT outlets, and Twitter. While *The Huffington Post* and LGBT outlets were most similar, there were drastic differences in content between liberal outlets and mainstream coverage. Additionally, Twitter had content that was far more critical of same-sex marriage than either the mainstream news coverage or the liberal-online and LGBT-outlet coverage (Hitlin, et al., 2013). This one study thus illustrates how attempts to have binary measures of liberal versus conservative outlets epitomized by the selection of *Fox News* and *MSNBC* still only capture a portion of the media agenda.

Additionally, the study demonstrates how there is potentially great diversity even within similarly minded ideological outlets, let alone diversity of opinions in audience generated content on platforms such as Twitter (Hitlin, et al., 2013).

From a minority or radical perspective, organizations have also been shown to have an ability to drive discussion through inter-media agenda building by developing content flow that originates in alternative media outlets. Mathes and Pfetsch’s (1991) seminal study examined how radical organizations on the left were able to slowly build and shape an agenda into mainstream media coverage by first finding support in alternative presses. From there, their case studies showed that liberal mainstream media picked up the issues and frames originally supplied by the organizations. Eventually, the topics became, in the words of Cobb and Elder (1972), issues.
This happened as mainstream media, both conservative and liberal, discussed and debated these topics (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991). While the conservative media did not adopt the frames developed by the radical organizations, the organization had proved successful at making it onto the mass media agenda. Additionally, the topics became part of the policy agenda as government officials addressed the issues, in turn also becoming part of the public agenda. Their study thus highlighted how traditional notions of mass media were not necessarily linear, foreshadowing the current hybrid media system.

**Theoretical gaps: Conceptualizing the audience**

The third limitation in the agenda-building and setting literature involves the last key player in this process: the audience. While the current study is not investigating agenda setting from an effects perspective in terms of how media or organizational content results in audience attitude or thought process change, it is important to consider the role of audiences who are not, or may never have been, mass or universal in nature. Scholarship that examines public opinion in mass may miss complex nuance found within communities, especially among minority populations and relating to issues that are not of mass concern (Gandy, 1982). While this may be truer than ever if audience fragmentation is similar to media fragmentation, as agenda melding scholarship would indicate (Shaw & Weaver, 2014; Vargo, et al., 2014), a problem of assuming a mass public may be more systemic to both of these theories. For example, Gandy (1982) criticized the fascination with the question, “What is the most important issue facing the country today?” over three decades ago by arguing that that this answer may be quite different for a minority population such as African Americans who may have a very different set of priorities.
Additionally, as a .7 or even a .5 can be considered a relatively strong correlation in quantitative analyses, what if an entire minority population is missing from these figures?

Events in Ferguson, Missouri in the summer of 2014 were illustrative. In an incident where a white police officer shot dead an unarmed African-American teenager, early public opinion polling demonstrated vastly different reactions based on a singular variable such as race (Rasmussen, 2014). Of those who had an opinion on the story, just shy of 23% of people thought the police officer should have been found guilty of murder while about 26% thought he was acting in self defense (Rasmussen, 2014). But, when looking at racial compositions, African Americans were more than three times as likely to state they believed the event to be a murder (Rasmussen, 2014). Perhaps aiding the arguments of agenda-melding scholars, mainstream news coverage resulted in vastly different presentations of the facts and context of the event (Hitlin and Vogt, 2014). Additionally, while Pew (Hitlin and Vogt, 2014) found that there were general trends in activity linking volume of tweets with corresponding volume in news coverage, beyond issue discussion, this type of data tells us little about whether information is really flowing from media to media, media to audience, or audience to media, let alone any activity of organizations that may have become involved in hopes of further developing the story. From a queer perspective, this dissertation hoped to obtain a better understanding of why phenomenon such as this may be occurring.

Recent data about LGBT Americans also reinforce Gandy’s (1982) argument that minority publics may have very different opinions on what the major issues of the day actually are. In a groundbreaking national study, Pew (Brown, A., 2013) showed that while 53% of LGBT Americans thought same-sex marriage should be categorized as a “top priority,” employment discrimination eclipsed marriage rights in perceived importance as 57% of
respondents considered it a top priority. Yet, while a scholarly search of any database can produce plenty of studies examining media coverage of same-sex marriage, not one could be found examining the relationship between media coverage and LGBT-employment rights. Thus, while mainstream media coverage of same-sex marriage has long dominated the discussion around LGBT rights, the Pew data certainly imply that there is not a strong relationship between media coverage and issue salience on these topics within the LGBT community, at least when examining mainstream coverage. Additional methodological questions then arise about how such an issue-agenda builds within alternative queer outlets, social media platforms, and through other means that are missing from these mass conceptualizations of agenda building and agenda setting.

With these systematic issues as a backdrop, it becomes important to review the other questions about these theories that have developed because of digital media environments.

**Public relations, agenda building and agenda setting in the digital age**

The notion of top-down, linear agenda building and setting has dramatically changed over the last decade. Scholars have developed theoretical applications of agenda building into the areas of digitally based inter-media agenda building (Meraz, 2009) and the capability of social media to offer reverse agenda building abilities (Kim & Lee, 2005). As discussed, inter-media agenda building refers to the ability of media being able to build the agenda of other media. As noted, in a traditional mass media era, Reese and Danielian (1989) found that *The New York Times* set the media agenda for other media outlets. But Mathes and Pfetsch (1991), among others, clearly demonstrated that such paths to inter-media agenda building and information flow are not always so universal.
In the digital sphere, Meraz (2009) has shown the agenda-building potential of blogs, some of which are able to drive their own media agenda while at other times responding to mainstream stories. Saffer (2013) has furthered this work by examining how the blogosphere has its own inter-media agenda-building dimensions. Kim and Lee (2005) and Song (2007) showed how issues and their attributes could also be built into the agenda by first being developed and nurtured through online groups, outlets and social media. For example, Song’s (2007) study examined how online groups formed in response to an incident in which American soldiers had tragically killed South Korean school children. While the mass media failed to initially cover the story in great detail, the issue was built directly into the public agenda by skipping the traditional media altogether, thanks to online outlets (Song, 2007). Akin to Cobb and Elder’s (1972) original concepts of a public agenda, a policy agenda, and the mass communication addition of a media agenda, such digital scholarship shows the diversity of possible agendas. Song’s (2007) work, coupled with Chadwick’s (2013) recent explanation of a hybrid media system, illustrate how issues can circulate among these three agendas without always having the same linear path that may have been seen in early agenda building studies.

Social media studies further highlight this new reality. Parmelee’s (2013) work on the agenda building ability of Twitter highlighted the platform’s role at building and shaping mainstream news coverage. His interviews with reporters found that journalists used Twitter as an information subsidy in much the same way that Curtin (1999) found journalists used older forms of subsidies to develop their coverage. Parmelee (2013) found that journalists used social media for purposes of story ideas, sourcing, and information quoting. Additionally, Marland’s (2012) work highlighted how strategic political actors were able to share image bytes, those being images that often framed candidates in a strategic (and positive) light, with ease, especially
with smaller news outlets that were more in need of content at reduced costs. Finally, Freelon and Karpf’s (2014) study of how Big Bird became a multi-day story following a 2012 presidential debate illustrates the agenda-building role of social media. Their study found that non-political actors, such as WWE wrestling stars and other celebrities, were able to turn the Big Bird reference into a trending topic of the debate, a story which then built into mainstream coverage in the days following the debate (Freelon & Karpf, 2014).

**The need for broader research in agenda building in the hybrid media system**

In many ways, this digital landscape may actually bring us back to many of the original arguments about agenda building made by Cobb and Elder (1972), as well as the role of public relations practitioners and information subsidies developed by Gandy (1982). In this vein, Song (2007) and Freelon and Karpf’s (2014) studies portray realities initially shown by Mathes and Pfetsch (1991) over two decades ago. Mathes and Pfetsch highlighted how there were different agenda realities, especially for minority or alternative organizations. Song (2007) and Freelon and Karpf’s (2014) work further illustrates how topics can be built into the mass media and mass public agenda by being developed in social media and online spaces, causing the mass media to respond with coverage based on the dynamics developed online. As a result, the mass media still have an ability to help advance a topic to an even greater mass public, but organizations and other groups may be able to develop the topic into the media agenda by initially bypassing the mass media and first developing strong engagement with key stakeholder networks in other ways, such as online forums and social media (Kim & Lee, 2005). Thus, the strategic targeting of highly engaged publics is in need of more thorough research.
Many recent occurrences highlight these realities. For example, the Human Rights Campaign, a queer advocacy group, could have targeted mass-media outlets with a red equal sign in hopes of driving up coverage of their symbol, developed to bring awareness of the LGBT population at the time the U.S. Supreme Court was deliberating the California Proposition 8 case in 2013 (Vie, 2014). The organization was instead able to target its stakeholders and supportive publics directly through social media as millions of Americans changed their Facebook profile icons to the now iconic red equal sign, a phenomenon that in turn garnered great mass media publicity (Vie, 2014). And yet, while the mass media coverage may have been an arguably added asset, the organization was able to obtain its likely objectives, that being mass awareness of the case and a promotion of visibility, by building through social media channels (Vie, 2014). This approach to agenda building may actually be harkening back more to notions of Cobb and Elder’s (1972) separation of possible agendas than to scholarship that treats the theory as being tied exclusively to mass media relations and news coverage. Instead, this example is illustrative of how public relations practitioners can build topics onto the public, policy, or media agenda depending on the publics or objectives involved. Furthermore, even within these agendas, there may be multiple public or media agendas in which public relations practitioners can agenda build in a fragmented society and media landscape (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008).

**Moving forward and Chapter II conclusion**

This study attempted to further highlight the issues that appear in studies such as Freelon and Karpf’s (2014) examination of how Big Bird became a media and public topic. Freelon and Karpf (2014) found that Big Bird, in many ways, became a trending topic not because traditional journalists or political organizations were able to drive public discussion online. Instead, non-
political actors, such as celebrities who have thousands if not millions of followers, were able to expand the topic into discussion all across social media networks and publics. Much more needs to be done to understand the role of other actors and interactions that may be playing a part in this media agenda-building process. Some issues, such as the events in Ferguson, Missouri, while covered in mass media, may also be operating in entirely different ways in non-mass outlets, be it conservative, liberal, queer or African-American focused media.

Freelon and Karpf’s (2014) study also solidifies the importance of the public relations professional in this digital agenda-building process. Beyond addressing broader interactions of media platforms that may be at play, another important question remains: Who was the first person to tweet about Big Bird? While I do not necessarily mean this literally, Kreiss’s (2014) interview-based work of political campaigns highlighted how both the Romney and Obama campaigns had pre-prepared several social media and other information subsidy pieces for distribution around a scheduled event, such as a debate. Thus, if, for example, the Obama campaign knew Romney was going to mention Big Bird, could Obama’s public relations team then have been the culprit for the topic being able to trend in the first place? This seems to be a central concept faculty teach in any PR class: plan strategically around events, build topics into the agenda efficiently by targeting appropriate opinion leaders and publics, and aim for these audiences to develop the issue into the broader public for you. Although Freelon and Karpf (2014) are not public relations scholars, their findings offer a clear road map of where public relations scholars should take agenda-building scholarship in the modern day of digital realities.

While this chapter has focused on how agenda building and agenda setting may be functioning in a hybrid media system, coupled with questions about these theories from an alternative media and niche public perspective, additional questions remain about the role of the
advocacy organization in this process. Consistent with findings that there are qualitative differences that may affect organization-to-media agenda building, such as journalist/practitioner relationships and the type of organization involved (Curtin, 1999; Ohl, et al, 1995), the next chapter will explore existing scholarly knowledge about the relationship between media and advocacy organizations, as well as a discussion about how intra-movement dynamics and organizations in the same movement may have different experiences during this process.
CHAPTER III: Social movements, media & frames, and power

Media and social movement organizations

So far, I have addressed how this study, using Chadwick’s (2013) concepts of a hybrid media system, had a base from which to explore how such a media reality further develops communication literature in relation to the theories of agenda building and agenda setting. This study also had an opportunity to bridge the public relations literature with the sociology literature by examining agenda building from the perspective of social movement organizations (SMOs), their relationship with media entities, and the qualitative differences between how organizations within the same movement may have unique media experiences, depending on their goals and targeted publics. This chapter will examine existing knowledge about how media have been shown to shape organizations and their corresponding causes, as well as how organizations have been shown to obtain media coverage relating to their issues of concern, serving as a base from which to examine how queer organizations attempting to promote and facilitate the Michael Sam story may have different media tactics and experiences with news media. Finally, this chapter will end with a discussion of how this dissertation may also be able to bridge these theoretical findings with questions of public relations and power.

Promotion and framing of SMOs and issues in the media

The first relevant question in regards to SMOs and media is: why is media coverage of SMOs important for the groups and their corresponding movements? Gamson and Wolfsfeld
(1993) summarized that SMOs need media for: a) validation, b) scope enlargement, and c) mobilization. Gamson and Modigliani’s (1988) long-term study about nuclear energy demonstrated how media coverage of organizations and movements is able to impact the public discussion of claims and issues associated with these movements and organizations. As addressed in Chapter Two, this affects what issues the public discusses and debates, ultimately affecting what becomes part of a formal policy agenda, a location where active political and policy change may occur (Cobb & Elder, 1972). For example, media coverage of the Three Mile Island meltdown makes the topic salient to the mass public, allowing nuclear and environmental SMOs involved with this topic the opportunity to further develop the issue into the public agenda. As Andrews and Caren (2010) state, the media thus have the ability to highlight claims, issues, and the speakers and sources associated with those issues. This allows SMOs to have a seat at the table, a desired goal as SMOs, by their very nature, are representing publics that traditionally do not have direct access to policymakers (Hall, et al., 1980). Amenta, et al (2009) have shown that issues associated with labor and civil rights, especially around African Americans, were most covered by the media over the last century. Thus, the success at obtaining this coverage in the 1950s and 1960s can lead to success at the policy level, such as the passing of the Voting Rights Act (Andrews, 2004). As Tarrow (1998) argued, the media has an important role at shaping public opinion and promoting certain issues into public discourse, akin to the mass communication theory of agenda setting.

While Chapter Two addressed how successful agenda building can often be a strategic goal, coverage alone does not always equate to success for the SMO or its movement (Gitlin, 1980). As the work of Meyer (1990) and Entman and Rojecki (1993) about the Nuclear Freeze Movement demonstrated, even though the majority of the nation was for freezing nuclear arms
production, coverage of the movement turned away supportive but non-active members of the public who agreed with the cause but separated themselves from the portrayal of these movement actors as radicals in the media. As Gitlin (1980) argues, such effects occur as SMOs, by their very nature, are challenging a dominant paradigm, and he suggests that the mainstream news media’s role is to maintain the status quo of society and existing power dynamics.

Portrayal of SMOs and movements in the media has resulted in a surge of sociology literature around the concept of framing. Framing scholars (Johnston and Noakes, 2005; Snow and Benford, 2000) highlight how cognitive, visual, and textual attributes shown in the media allow the broader public to associate these portrayals with organizations and their movements, creating interpretations of meaning from that process. Gitlin (1980) demonstrated how Students for a Democratic Society members were portrayed as anti-war communists who lacked organization, causing the SMO to be delegitimized, non-credible, and ultimately, even portrayed as a threat to society. Thus, while the media’s portrayal of SMOs and movements not only shapes public opinion by highlighting certain issues and framing them in a particular manner, these results can have dramatic effects on SMOs themselves (Gitlin, 1980). This speaks back to Gamson and Wolfsfeld’s (1993) claims that the media are able to enlarge the scope of SMO claims, make certain SMOs credible (potentially at the expense of others), and aid SMOs’ ability to mobilize. On this latter point, Gitlin’s (1980) findings demonstrated how, even when the news media highlighted an SMO in a negative and inaccurate light, it still led to increased mobilization for the movement. Of course, this mobilization came at a cost as these new members, based on what they had seen in media coverage, were largely from a radical anti-war base, permanently changing the membership and the overall dynamics of the organization (Gitlin, 1980).
There are several strengths and weaknesses in regards to these theoretical claims. From a strengths perspective, Amenta et al’s (2009) scholarship highlights a correlational link between SMOs and movements that received not only significant media attention but also noteworthy policy and cultural change. Additionally, while SMOs like Gitlin’s (1980) SDS organization were harmed by media portrayal, other SMOs of the decade were portrayed as more moderate alternatives, in turn able to make claims on behalf of the mainstream public that was now against the war. Thus, as Tarrow (1998) and Bennett (1983) summarize, it is important to continue to consider how media play a role in bringing about change.

Yet, limitations remain in the literature. SMOs have been shown to be most successful when advancing issues that are culturally congruent to issues and frames that are already being discussed in the media and policy agenda (Smith, McCarthy, McPhail & Augustyn, 2001). Typically, these “big” issues revolve around political topics that relate to some concern for the mass public (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991). Yet, as Bernstein (1997) and Staggenborg (1994) have shown, there are vastly different intra-movement dynamics within issues. In its review of media content from multiple queer organizations, coupled with examination of news media story sourcing, this dissertation hoped to better understand these intra-movement dynamics. As noted, Gitlin (1980) and Tuchmann (1978) found that the media often create a moderate-versus-radical dynamic. While scholarship tends often focuses on why news coverage may be detrimental to organizations, more theoretical development could be done exploring how other SMOs within the same movement, actively or not, benefit or interact, from such media activity. For example, in Rohlinger’s study of the Christian-faith movement, she found that evangelical groups that tied morality to the state became more powerful organizations that dominated the movement and associated media coverage. If Gandy’s (1982) notions of media coverage and information acting
as a commodity are then applied, this gap may actually act as a bridge back to existing resource mobilization scholarship as the limited ability for coverage of all players, their topics, or their frames within a movement speaks back to issues of intra-movement power dynamics and the roles of active participants. Thus, if Karpf (2012) were to examine these intra-movement dynamics among legacy versus non-legacy organizations from a technology perspective, how would the hybrid media system affect media coverage and information flow within movements themselves? The next question becomes: How have organizations been shown to obtain media coverage at all? — a question this study hoped to better understand by coupling a content analysis with interviews of organizational communication professionals.

**Agenda building from an SMO perspective**

Gitlin (1980) summarized the importance for SMOs to understand the “implicit rules of news making” (p. 3). As Tuchman (1978) and Gans (1979) noted, news values, journalistic practices, capital requirements, and other media realities have major impact on issue selection and resulting coverage. For example, Gans (1979) found a heavy reliance on elite sources, limiting the ability for those attempting to make claims counter to elites to have a voice. Similarly, Steele’s (1997) scholarship examining how mainstream media used unofficial sources to shape coverage of the debate around the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy illustrated how the selection of people speaking for each side of the argument created apparent inequities in power dynamics. Steele found that while the press used activist outsiders as sources in support of gays in the military, the anti-gays in the military argument was shaped by the selection of retired and former elite members, such as military or public officials. Thus, an elite versus non-elite, or
insider versus outsider, dynamic was created, demonstrating the difficulties of outsiders to have an equitable seat at the table in mainstream news coverage (Steele, 1997).

This principle of power could also be further explored from the perspective of who within a movement gets to build topics into the media. Andrews and Caren (2010), in their examination of environmental organizations in North Carolina, found that organizations that were more professional and had routine practices were better able to obtain news coverage. Additionally, those making more incremental claims for change that corresponded with existing issues, such as economic development and public health, were more successful at obtaining coverage than were groups promoting novel issues or issues that were more disruptive to the dominant system (Andrews & Caren, 2010). Conversely, Sobeiraj (2010) found that protest groups faced a double-edged sword. Perhaps learning from this literature, these groups trained hard to be quotable, newsworthy, and develop media routines. Yet, she found that this reduced the interest of journalists as newsmakers deemed such tactics to be lacking in authenticity. Thus, activist groups without the ability to formally organize in a more routine fashion seemed to face an impossible task in obtaining desired news coverage (Sobeiraj, 2010).

Much of Rohlingher and colleagues’ (2002; 2006; Rohlinger & Brown, 2013) recent scholarship further highlights this divide between more formalized and less organized groups. In Rohlinger and Brown’s (2013) study of two SMOs within the Academic Freedom Movement, the scholars found complementary aspects of both Andrews & Caren (2010) and Sobeiraj’s (2010) work. In examining a more formalized and credible SMO versus a less formalized SMO within the same movement, they found that the formal and already credible SMO was able to easily obtain news coverage from mainstream outlets and was often able to advance its concerns without losing control of its message (Rohlinger & Brown, 2013). In fact, because of these
abilities, the organization intentionally used the media as a primary outlet to advance its claims and specifically targeted general public and policy makers by using the media as its tool (Rohlinger & Brown, 2013). Conversely, the less formalized and credible organization was unable to use mainstream media to advance its own claims (Rohlinger & Brown, 2013). Yet, Rohlinger and Brown (2013) noted the weaker group’s ability to in turn target non-mainstream channels, be it alternative media or their own network of members, to build their agenda. This complements Mathes and Pfetsch’s (1991) findings that radical organizations may be able to ultimately make their issues salient within the mainstream media, and thus the public and policy agenda, by building those issues up by first targeting alternative media.

When considering these findings from the perspective of a hybrid media system, how does an increased array of interacting media channels affect these issues of intra-movement power and strategy? While Rohlinger’s work has examined qualitative differences in how SMOs target their publics, based on their viewpoints and standing with mainstream media, the current study hoped to better understand these dynamics among queer organizations, coupled with an analysis of how these organizations may be able to utilize mixed-media platforms to best reach their publics.

Sobeiraj (2010), Andrews and Caren (2010), and Rohlinger and Brown’s (2013) ongoing work all speak to notions of power dynamics within movements, harkening back to resource mobilization literature, as many of these formalized groups likely need larger budgets, professional staff, and other overhead. But, as SMO scholars can attest to (Doyle, 2004; Bernstein, 1997), with such formalization, larger SMOs may be minimizing or ignoring many of the activist members and causes of their movements.
For example, in the LGBT sphere, Doyle (2004) found this in his examination of GLAAD as internal rifts were created between suit-type professionals and activists within the organization. Furthermore, Meadows’ (2014) continuing work regarding the Amendment One campaign in North Carolina has so far illustrated how high-resource national SMOs are able to dominate media coverage of even local events, conflicting with local SMO culture, issues, and claims. Thus, further work needs to connect the work of scholars such as Sobeiraj (2010) and Andrews and Caren (2010) by exploring whether there are other ways that less formalized groups can stay true to their causes and claims while still being able to obtain media coverage, without that coverage resulting in counterproductive and harmful portrayals. Examining these questions through Chadwick’s (2013) hybrid media lens created a strong base for the research goals of this dissertation.

More work also needs to examine whether traditional media should even be the targets of advocacy organizations, especially in a digital age. As Rohlinger and Brown (2013) and Mathes and Pfetsch (1991) have shown, strategic targets of SMOs can vary even within the same movement. Therefore, by examining how queer SMOs involved in the Michael Sam case were distributing not only press releases that target mainstream media but were also engaged with publics directly through social media, this dissertation returned to a theoretical problematization of the relationship between SMOs and media depending on who the targeted publics are. As Karpf (2012) and Tufekci (2013) have addressed, many organizations are now able to bypass the traditional gatekeeping function of media, at least within certain campaigns. For example, Karpf’s (2012) work on digital leftist organizations found that these newer groups, even with minimal resources, are successful at obtaining media coverage but are also able to bypass the
need for such coverage, based on the ability to mobilize directly through the internet. Much nuance in this theoretical area thus appears possible.

**Power: Bridging the social movements literature with public relations**

Scholarship examining the relationships among social movements, news processes and media content commonly deal with questions about struggles over meaning, the role of organizations, and issues of power and access. While the organization itself may not always be the central focus of analysis in this literature, public relations scholarship often does make an organization and its relationship with different publics a fundamental area of analysis.

Though arguably not the dominant paradigm of current public relations scholarship, a recent wave of critical literature has emerged within the discipline examining issues of power between organizations and other organizations, as well between organizations and various publics (see Motion & Weaver, 2005; Roper, 2005). This has led to the creation of *Public Relations Inquiry*, a peer-reviewed journal designed to answer questions about power within public relations. Public relations professionals are argued to be key strategic players in the creation of discourse (Motion and Weaver, 2005). As sociologists discuss issue framing as a battle over meaning, public relations scholars similarly note that there are multiple and competing discourses present at any given time (Roper, 2005). Motion and Weaver (2005) argue that organizations, through the use of their public relations practitioners, are able to maintain the status quo by keeping their discourse dominant over other discourses competing in that space. A bridge between the public relations literature and the social movements literature then becomes apparent when analyzing the relationship between competing organizations or organizations and their relationship with different types of publics.
It is argued that dominant organizations and their public relations staff attempt to keep the status quo by manufacturing consent through the promotion of certain information at the exclusion of other information (Roper, 2005). This scholarship thus adopts a conceptualization of power similar to Michel Foucault’s notions of “regimes of truth” (1980, p. 73). Foucault argues that regimes of truth are related to power/knowledge – all three of these principles being inherently linked in a circular manner. From a public relations or organizational perspective, power relates to the struggle that constantly exists in the creation of these discourses that are fighting to be dominant (Roper, 2005). Importantly then, Foucault (1980) also notes that power is not only a constraint but also a creation. In other words, a combination of the social movements and public relations literature might lead to questions about how advocacy organizations may be empowered, or disempowered, by their ability to successfully shape broader discussion of an issue relevant to their cause.

This dissertation hoped to examine the intersection of these disciplines by investigating dynamics of power between the news media and queer advocacy organizations. This dissertation also examined intra-movement dynamics of power by exploring potential differences between queer organizations in their approach to media activity, depending on the platform and news topic involved.

**Moving forward: SMOs, social media, and alternative media**

Moving forward, many current limitations in the scholarship can be addressed by tackling issues of varied goals and targeted publics of SMOs within the same movement, coupled with a further exploration of how the internet, social media, and alternative media outlets are changing the strategic realities for SMOs.
While scholars have been examining the relationship between digital media and social movements over the last few years (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Van De Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004), like the communication literature, much of this research has focused on digital media questions without looking at Chadwick’s (2013) call for a more holistic view of the media system. For example, entire special issues of journals across the communication, sociology, and political science disciplines have been devoted to social media and social movement events such as the Arab Spring, the Egyptian Protests, and Occupy Wall Street (Howard & Parks, 2012; Nielsen, 2013; Tufekci & Freelon, 2013). Most of this scholarship examines questions of movements and media from the perspective of social networks and the development of online communities (Tufekci & Freelon, 2013). But, what does this work tell us about the role of SMOs and older forms of media interacting in digital space? Importantly, from an older media perspective, Andrews and Biggs (2006) found that the media and a few key players, often associated with organized efforts by SMOs, were far more effective at spreading sit-ins than social networks. As Karpf (2012) addressed, many digital scholars have jumped straight into testing existing theories in digital spaces without addressing whether there were other systemic problems with those theories in the first place or whether solitary examinations of the digital landscape may miss core existing findings of sociological research. In this regard, the findings of Andrews and Biggs (2006), at the very least, call into question whether social network analyses may overstate or miss other important aspects about the relationship between media, organizations, and other involved factors and players.

This hesitation to jump on the social network bandwagon lies not only in the findings of Andrews and Biggs (2006) but also the scholarship of others who have not fully applied considerations of the role of strategic actors to these events. For example, Kreiss’ (2012; 2014)
scholarship has examined these questions from a political organization perspective. He found that political campaigns were able to drive social media traffic around strategic events, based on pre-scripted Tweets that were designed to be at the ready for pre-planned events. While political campaigns and SMOs are different types of organizations, strategically speaking, this type of scholarship seems to offer clues as to how SMOs may be, or could be, strategically employing digital media to circumvent, or even manipulate, traditional media gatekeepers.

Song’s (2007) work on the ability for Korean activists to agenda build online in response to the killing of South Korean children by American soldiers demonstrates how Mathes and Pfetsch’s (1991) “spill-over” effect may be able to operate in modern day as these organized online efforts eventually spilled over into mainstream coverage. So, if scholarship has shown the ability for SMOs to strategically target alternative media channels (Rohlinger & Brown, 2013) in hopes of building up a broader agenda, and scholarship has shown the ability for activists to agenda build in online spaces, then what are the abilities of an SMO to do these same things?

Chapter III conclusion

While SMOs may still be able to potentially plant strategic seeds in online environments, the resulting word-of-mouth that may grow from that activity may further be able to remove the SMO from the resulting coverage. While this may have implications on the SMO to actually claim credit for the advancement of its own issues and claims, as shown, media attention of SMOs often comes at the expense of the SMO (Gitlin, 1980). This study thus attempted to further theoretical inquiries by examining how these older theoretical findings are operating in the newer media landscape (Chadwick, 2013; Karpf, 2012) without ignoring many of the strengths of existing older media and sociology scholarship, such as that done by scholars like
Andrews and Biggs (2006). While scholars have jumped into the social network and digital media pool, this study reasserted the need for a more thorough examination of the role of the SMO and other strategic organizational actors, as well as the variations of targeted publics and types of media platforms at play, which may be part of these equations.
CHAPTER IV: Research questions and methods

Research questions

This dissertation examined agenda building and agenda setting processes through the lens of Andrew Chadwick’s (2013) theoretical framework of a hybrid media system by exploring a case example within the queer rights movement: coverage of Michael Sam’s public coming out announcement and his attempt to make a National Football League roster. The goal of the study was to better understand how topic agendas and content frames of media outlets, advocacy organizations and audiences formed upon interacting with each other. The organizational strategies and motives behind these efforts were also examined through a review of public media content, coupled with the use of interviews.

The following research questions will be applied to the case study of Michael Sam to examine how interactions between media platforms, organizations and individuals resulted in information flow. To answer the following RQs, a qualitative coding process of media content examined elements including, but not limited to: use of sources, latent and manifest frames, tone, headlines, story topic, and time stamp. Audiences refers to comments made by the public, as seen on mainstream and queer media comment boards, social media responses on queer organizational pages, and any feedback on queer organizational websites.

The research questions of this study were:

RQ1: How did mainstream news media, queer media, queer organizations, and news and social media audiences’ topic agendas and content frames interact with each other, over time?
RQ2: How did queer organization communication materials and tactics differ, if at all, from other queer organizations?

RQ3: How did mainstream news media coverage differ, if at all, from queer media coverage?

RQ4: What other organizational strategies, such as the use of differing information subsidy materials or behind-the-scenes relationships, affect the agenda-building process in a hybrid media system?

RQ5a: How do these findings further develop the theories of agenda building and agenda setting when considered within a hybrid media system?

RQ5b: How do these findings further develop the theories of agenda building and agenda setting when applied to niche publics and niche media?

RQ5c: How do these findings further develop the theories of agenda building and agenda setting when considering the role of power among organizations, media, and audience publics?

Methodology

To answer these research questions, this study used a qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to examine media coverage of Michael Sam’s public coming out and journey into the NFL in 2014. Interviews with select individuals who were involved in the story were used to offer additional insights. This section will explain the rationale for using a case study approach, discuss the Michael Sam case, and describe the processes of qualitative content analysis and interviewing that were used.

Use of case studies

A case study is a commonly used method that allows a researcher to explore specific occurrences in a more in-depth manner than other approaches may permit (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Case studies attempt to be rich in description and detail, making them highly compatible with qualitative approaches of research (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The approach is better able to understand the why and how behind an event as the method allows for an examination of cultural, social,
ideological, and other contextual factors that may explain why an occurrence happened the way it did (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This method compares to the approach used by agenda-building scholars decades ago, especially rooted in the newsroom observations of Gans (1979) and Tuchman (1978). By using rich description, these scholars were able to develop a better understanding of the news-making and agenda-building process by combining observations with broader societal and cultural contexts.

Chadwick (2013) coupled media ethnography with interviews to observe and analyze a case, whereas other scholars have examined cases by using content analysis, qualitatively examining media content (Altheide, 1987; Hindman & Thomas, 2013). Cases are particularly useful when a scholar is attempting to better comprehend the existence of a black swan, understanding why the black swan is the way it is and how it has come to be (Kuhn, 1987). In this instance, the figurative finding of a black swan is the attempt to better understand whether there are unique patterns of communication found when examining how queer media, organizations and audiences engage with a story within a hybrid media system. The rich and thorough approach of a case study thus supports this study’s attempt to better understand how and why the Pew (Brown, A. 2013) survey of LGBT Americans showed that there is a mismatch in issue salience between mainstream media coverage and the agenda priorities of the minority community. A case-method approach is therefore essential for future theory building as such rich detail can create new questions and understandings of the social world, serving as a base for future scholarship to then explore further (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

This study attempted to more richly understand how traditional theorizations of agenda building and agenda setting apply when considering queer stories, media, and audiences. The ramifications of the hybrid media system’s interacting and diverse platforms on these theories
were also studied. As no known scholarship has yet to examine these theories through this particular lens, this project used a case study to allow for a richer understanding as to how and why these theories may apply when considering queer media and a hybrid media system.

**Case study: Michael Sam**

To promote future theoretical development involving niche media and the hybrid media system, this study examined media coverage and communication materials about Michael Sam’s public coming out and his journey into the NFL. The discussion of queer athletes in sport was a prominent topic in 2014. While several professional athletes have publicly come out as gay over the last few years, no queer sports story has received more attention than Michael Sam’s announcement that he is a gay man. The NFL remains America’s most popular sport (Stellino, 2015), and Sam’s announcement was well covered by media outlets, promoted by queer advocacy organizations, and discussed by audiences. While Sam received award-winning acclaim as a defensive end in the SEC, college’s most prestigious football conference, Sam saw his projected draft ranking fall dramatically following the announcement that he was gay (Schwab, 2014).

While American perceptions of gay individuals have shifted dramatically over the last few decades, sports have often been called “the last closet in America” (Athlete, 2014a, para. 5). Though a significant amount of scholarly work examining the gay rights movement has focused on the media’s discussion of equal marriage rights, analyses of media coverage of queer athletes has been much more limited. Additionally, no scholarly work has focused on the role of movement organizations in an athlete’s public coming out. Finally, a comparative examination of queer versus mainstream audience engagement with a story has yet to be documented. A case
study examining the media coverage of Michael Sam therefore served as an informative example of the potential differences and similarities between queer and mainstream outlets, as well as the interacting role of media outlets, advocacy organizations, and audiences.

Methods and analysis

**Qualitative content analysis.** This section will discuss the methodological literature that justified this study’s qualitative content analysis design, followed by a specific description of how these principles were applied in this study. Counter to a quantitative content analysis approach, which promotes validity and reliability using inter-coder procedures as a way to advance replication and generalizability (Altheide, 1987), qualitative content analysis seeks to systemically examine content in hopes of finding greater context and meaning (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2004). In the current study, this meant finding the context behind the building and shaping of media content. Cassell & Symon (1994) delineate the differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches by highlighting how a qualitative method allows for: “a focus on interpretation rather than quantification; an emphasis on subjectivity rather than objectivity; flexibility in the process of conducting research; an orientation towards process rather than outcome; (and) a concern with context” (p. 7). Through a rigorous process, “themes or patterns” (p. 1278) emerge, affording the researcher a greater understanding of the content under review (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Hsieh & Shannon (2005) highlight how there are many procedures available when utilizing a qualitative content analysis, but each approach has different rationales for its application. While purely inductive methods may be more rooted in grounded theory, deriving meaning and codes exclusively from the data itself, this study utilized what these scholars call a
directed qualitative content analysis. Consistent with other qualitative approaches, this type of content analysis reduced vast amounts of content into understandable categories or codes by locating these “patterns or themes” (p. 1285). Counter to a grounded theory approach, a directed approach creates initial coding categories that derive from already existing theory that in turn guide the researchers as they review the content under examination (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Yet, unlike quantitative coding, the reflexive and immersive nature of a directed qualitative content analysis still allows the researcher the ability to find new phenomena or categories as the coding occurs (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A directed approach was thus able to better explore the limitations of existing theoretical knowledge by using a coding process rooted in theory yet adaptable to phenomena that became apparent upon qualitative review of the data.

**Sample and procedure.** This study’s sample began with a purposive list of media and organizational content from which to review. As this study was ultimately looking at concepts such as story flow and sourcing patterns, any content that was cited within this initial sample was also coded. For example, if the *New York Times* linked to a piece in *Deadspin* or if an audience comment shared a tweet from an advocacy organization, the *Deadspin* article and the advocacy organization tweet became part of the sample.

The pre-selected sample of media content was as follows:

**Mainstream news.** As much existing scholarship has heavily relied on mainstream and traditional news media outlets when studying agenda building and agenda setting processes, it was important to include mainstream outlets in this study to serve as an initial base from which to compare queerer media sources. Consistent with the work done by well-cited agenda-setting and agenda-building scholars (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Golan, 2006 McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Smith et al., 2001), this study started with stories that discussed Michael Sam that were
published in the *New York Times*. Historically, the *New York Times* has been shown to be an influential intermedia agenda-building source (Reese & Danielian, 1989).

Using *LexisNexis*, any *Times* story that mentioned “Michael Sam” between January 1, 2014 and December 31, 2014 was pulled. The pull resulted in 92 *Times* articles – including blog posts. The date range allowed for a longitudinal analysis of how the Sam story ebbed and flowed throughout the year. In January 2014, Sam was obtaining end-of-the-season coverage for his senior year at the University of Missouri. In February 2014, Sam came out publicly. The sample start date therefore allowed for the ability to review news coverage prior to Sam’s coming out announcement. The sample end date also captured the post-NFL coverage of Michael Sam. As Sam was dropped from the league in October 2014, coverage quickly declined. Yet, an end date of December 31st allowed the study to capture end-of-the-year coverage that looked back at Sam’s year.

As the Michael Sam story related to sports, *ESPN*, America’s number one sports news outlet (alexa.com), was the second mainstream venue included in the study’s pre-selected sample. The same “Michael Sam” search term was placed on the outlet’s own search engine. *ESPN*’s search engine has its own filtering options. The outlet’s “stories” collection is a database of *ESPN*’s written articles. The “stories” filter was thus used. Using this search process, 402 articles were placed into the study’s sample from *ESPN*.

Finally, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* was chosen to give the study a local mainstream news comparative. *The Post-Dispatch* was the most appropriate local outlet to select because Michael Sam played football at the University of Missouri, and the St. Louis Rams selected Sam in the NFL draft. *Post-Dispatch* articles were collected using *LexisNexis*. The same search terms and dates were used. This resulted in 167 *Post-Dispatch* articles being added to the sample.
Queer news media. Queer news media outlets were selected to compare with the above mainstream outlets. Queerty is “the leading news and entertainment site targeting the LGBT market” with over one-million unique monthly visitors (GayCities, 2012). The outlet was therefore placed into the sample as a queer news comparative. Articles were collected using the outlet’s own search engine. The same search terms and date range were used. This resulted in 47 Queerty articles being added to the sample.

To capture coverage from a queer sports outlet, Outsports was chosen. Outsports is the top-rated queer blog catering to sports news (Cision, 2011), making it a queer comparative to ESPN. Articles were collected using the outlet’s own search engine. The same search terms and date range were used. This resulted in 296 Outsports articles being added to the sample.

Organizational documents. This study also examined materials produced by queer organizations. As noted in the literature review, public relations studies commonly compare press releases against news content to assess the agenda-building abilities of an organization or campaign (Kiousis, et al., 2006; Ohl, et al., 1995; Walters, Walters & Gray, 1996). Other studies have examined organizational online content to test the same theory (Curtin & Gaither, 2004; Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser & Howes, 2009). More recent studies have used social media as a tool from which to test organizational agenda building or agenda setting (Lariscy, et al, 2009; Parmelee, 2013; Vargo, et al., 2014). Consistent with the hybrid media focus of this dissertation, this study aimed to analyze the differences found within multiple forms of organizational materials. This study therefore captured both older and newer forms of organizational media content that discussed Michael Sam, including website material, press releases, Facebook posts and Tweets.
To include media content from multiple queer organizations, materials from the following three organizations were captured:

_The Human Rights Campaign:_ The HRC is the nation’s largest queer rights organization (hrc.org/the-hrc-story/about-us) and represents a legacy organization that is based in Washington, D.C. Its main focus is political in nature, though it was involved in promoting Michael Sam.

,GLAAD: Like the HRC, GLAAD is a large, national queer rights organization that is also mainstream and legacy in nature (Doyle, 2004). The organization has traditionally focused on media portrayal of queer individuals and their stories (Cabosky, 2014; Doyle, 2004). The group was highly involved in promoting the Michael Sam story.

_Athlete Ally:_ Developed by straight allies of the queer rights movement, the sports advocacy organization attempts to promote equality, awareness, and understanding of queer sexuality through sports (athleteally.org/about). The organization was also highly active in promoting the Michael Sam story.

HRC and GLAAD had search portals on their websites that were used to locate blog, web, and press release material the organizations distributed about Michael Sam. Each organizational website was searched multiple times throughout 2014 to pull any web posts that mentioned “Michael Sam.” Athlete Ally’s page had no searchable portal, but the organization’s website content was more limited. Multiple manual searches were done throughout the year on the organization’s news tab to capture any posts that discussed Sam. Because these websites’ search functions were not as defined as portals such as _LexisNexis_, posts from each organization were captured and then manually reviewed to keep any content that spoke about Sam for at least one sentence. This increased the ability for human error in the scanning process, but also
arguably allowed for a more accurate selection of related content. This resulted in an initial sample of the following number of organizational web documents about Michael Sam: Athlete Ally 13; GLAAD 106; the HRC 41.

While organizational press releases and web materials have traditionally been studied as information subsidy materials that particularly target media outlets, modern literature has also examined how new and social media can build an agenda or communicate with other audience members directly, potentially bypassing the need to use the news media altogether (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Weberling, 2012). Some scholars have similarly shown how social media activity can have a reverse agenda building or setting effect upon the news media (Kim & Lee, 2006; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Thus, this study also captured the social media output of these organizations, as seen on their Facebook pages and Twitter feeds.

Each of these organizations has an active Facebook page. At several times in the second half of 2014, I captured and digitally stored organizational Facebook posts. At the end of December 2014, I separated and filed any Facebook posts that were related to Michael Sam. Based on the interactive nature of Facebook, coupled with the platform’s role as the most widely used social platform in the United States, Facebook also served as the primary source of content from which to examine social media audience activity. Again, while this increased the ability for human error in the scanning process, it also arguably allowed for a more accurate selection of related content. This resulted in an initial sample of the following number of organizational Facebook posts about Michael Sam: Athlete Ally 48; GLAAD 27; the HRC 6.

Finally, these organizations’ Twitter handles were also pulled for use in this study. Each of the organizations’ Twitter feeds were initially captured on May 5, 2014. Tweets were collected using a Python script that was developed by a third party. This process captured all
tweets from each of these organizations’ feeds from at least January 1, 2014 to the date of the pull. A second pull of organizational Tweets was run at the end of 2014. The second data capture pulled all organizational tweets through December 21, 2014. Organizational Twitter feeds were finally manually reviewed at the start of January 2015 to capture any additional Twitter posts about Michael Sam made by these organizations between December 22, 2014 and December 31, 2014.

Following these collections of Twitter data, each collection file was reviewed manually to select all tweets that referenced Michael Sam or his story in some manner. Again, while this increased the ability for human error in the scanning process, it also arguably allowed for a more accurate selection of related content. While Facebook served as the primary social media platform of review based on its far more prevalent use, Twitter allowed for additional insights into any variation between organizational activities seen on a second social media platform. This resulted in an initial sample of the following number of organizational Tweets about Michael Sam: Athlete Ally 94; GLAAD 62; the HRC 31.

Feedback from audiences was captured on all news media content, as well as organizational material that allowed readers to comment. Based on the size of the readership, all comments made by readers of Outsports and Queerty were captured and analyzed. ESPN and the New York Times had a different comment board structure, and often had thousands of comments per article. To functionally be able to capture and analyze audience feedback on these mainstream news sites, the first page of audience feedback on a given article was captured. Both outlets had comment board formats that had clear lines of demarcation on audience comment pages. On ESPN, the first page of audience content included all comments made until the page forces a reader to “view more.” On the NYT, the news outlet algorithm collected the top
comments for each article, breaking them down into “Readers’ Picks” and “NYT Picks.” The first page of top comments for each article was included in the study – the first page ending when a reader would need to scroll down to view more. Audience feedback on organizational Facebook posts was also collected and analyzed. GLAAD and the HRC allowed comments on their web blogs, so audience feedback seen on those postings was also reviewed and analyzed.

**Coding and analysis process.** From this sample – and the content linked to from this sample – a qualitative content analysis ensued. A directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) began with a first round of coding. The first round of coding particularly noted content attributes that directly related to the study’s aims of better understanding the theories of agenda building and agenda setting in the context of a hybrid media system and within queer media outlets. In this regard, the first round of coding was deductive. To facilitate the first round of coding, all of the content was initially separated by outlet. Then, each outlet’s materials were laid out chronologically, regardless of the unit of analysis, be it a news article, organizational web document, press release, Facebook post, or tweet. Each of these units were then coded for the presence of characteristics that applied to these theories and RQs, namely use of sources, latent and manifest frames, tone, headlines, story topic, and time stamps.

During this initial coding stage, attributes from each article or post were documented. Using a constant comparison approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), as initial patterns and themes emerged during this stage, a parallel coding procedure took place to make initial documentation of thematic developments. This first round of coding continued until each unit in the sample was reviewed and coded, and its attributes and characteristics were documented.

Once the first round of coding was complete, all of the units of analysis – initially from separate outlets – were all combined on the same timeline and placed into a Microsoft Word
Document. As examining information flow and agenda building was at the core of the study’s goals, it was important to structure these findings chronologically to subsequently analyze places in which flow occurred, as well as moments when flow was limited between outlets. Once all of these units were placed onto a single chronological timeline, a second round of coding took place.

While the first round of coding was deductive, looking for attributes that could directly answer this study’s RQs about agenda building and agenda setting, a second round of coding was axial in nature (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Axial coding, which is commonly used in grounded theory approaches, allows researchers to both inductively and deductively compare and code material to find patterns, themes, and broader context (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Axial coding of the merged chronological timeline allowed me to build from the deductive coding to make more inductive findings about moments and patterns of information flow and agenda building. Sam’s story was then able to be examined event by event. Each moment in the timeline was then coded to give it context, structure and meaning. Once all these chronological moments were coded in this fashion, a final inductive analysis occurred. This analysis reviewed all the themes and patterns developed in the axial stage of the coding process and generated theoretical developments about what these findings, themes, and patterns meant about when, how, and why information flow occurred – or did not occur – across different parts of the hybrid media system.

**Interviews.** Consistent with agenda-building and agenda-setting scholarship, the above-described examination of media content served as the core method of this study. Yet, the work of Curtin (1999) and Parmelee (2013) highlights how interviews can offer supplemental insights into the news processes and organizational realities that may affect the agenda-building process. Interviews with strategic organizational actors and journalists involved in the Michael Sam story
were therefore conducted. Initially, this study aimed to obtain three to eight interviews with individuals who were associated with organizations that were involved with Michael Sam or journalists who covered his story.

After the study was granted an exemption from the University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB), journalists and organizational professionals were contacted via e-mail. Interview requests were made in February through April of 2014. Those who responded with interest were sent IRB-approved informational consent forms, informing them of their rights as interview participants. Because of the public profile nature of their employment and professional work, ensuring anonymity was unlikely. Therefore, participants were told that they should only participate in the study if they were willing to have their names attributed to any data they shared on-the-record. All interview subjects were given the option of being interviewed over a videoconference program like Skype or by a phone call.

In total, six interviews were obtained, three with prominent journalists and three with high-ranking organizational actors. All interviews were conducted over the phone, except for an in-person interview with Artis Twyman. Interviews were conducted in March and April 2015.

The interview participants included:

Wade Davis – Mr. Davis is the Executive Director of the You Can Play Project, a sports advocacy organization. The organization strives to promote inclusion – especially for LGBT individuals – across sports. Davis was highly involved in Sam’s story, having worked directly with GLAAD in interviews following Sam’s announcement. Davis also works with the NFL on LGBT issues and trainings, including a seminar with the St. Louis Rams following Sam’s drafting to the team.
Dale Hansen – Mr. Hansen is a long-time sports commentator for WFAA in Dallas.

Hansen became active in the Sam story when he made an on-air commentary in defense of Sam. The video commentary went viral, obtaining millions of online views and leading to an interview for Hansen on the Ellen program.

Joe Strauss – Mr. Strauss is a local sports columnist and reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Strauss offered many columns about Michael Sam throughout the year, and gave the study a local perspective.

Hudson Taylor – Mr. Taylor is the founder and Executive Director of Athlete Ally. The organization focuses on using athletes, both straight and queer, to take “a stand against homophobia and transphobia in sports” (athleteally.org/about).

Artis Twyman – Mr. Twyman is the Senior Director of Communications for the St. Louis Rams. Twyman’s interview gave behind-the-scenes insights into what it was like for the Rams organization during 2015. Twyman was able to offer media relations, agenda building, and internal relations perspectives about the organization’s handling of the first openly gay professional NFL athlete. Twyman’s interview was conducted in-person at the annual International Association for Communication and Sport Conference in Charlotte, North Carolina on Friday, March 6, 2015.

Cyd Zeigler – Mr. Zeigler is the co-founder of Outsports, the leading news outlet for queer sports coverage. Zeigler wrote one of the few special access stories about Michael Sam’s coming out. He was able to attend a private function with Sam’s management team in the days before the story broke, leading to an exclusive behind-the-scenes story about Sam’s announcement. Throughout the rest of 2014, Zeigler was a leading news media voice in the Sam story.
Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format (McCracken, 1988). This structure uses open-ended questions that allow interview participants to speak freely, in turn leading to follow-up questions from the researcher. Interview subjects were asked questions about their relationship and involvement in the Sam story. Journalists were asked about topics such as their professional practices and news routines, their perceptions of media coverage of the Michael Sam story, how they react to coverage from other outlets or influence the coverage of other outlets, and how they interact with organizational communication professionals. The organizational interview subjects were asked about topics such as how their organizations attempt to set media and non-media agendas, what methods their organizations use to accomplish their strategic goals, the experiences their organizations have had with the media, and other factors about how they communicate with their members and other publics.

Interviews ranged from just over 27 minutes to just under 44 minutes. The mean interview time was just over 34 minutes and 32 seconds. Interview participants were not given any compensation for their time. To protect any off-the-record statements made by interview subjects, all personal interview notes of the researcher, audio recordings and/or interview transcripts developed as part of the study have been kept confidential on password secured devices, consistent with IRB-approved protocol. Any off-the-record comments are accordingly not used in this study’s findings or analysis to protect the privacy and the trust of interview subjects. Therefore, all of the quoted findings later presented in this study were on-the-record statements. To analyze the interviews, I reviewed any notes that I took during a given interview, as well as interview audio files and/or transcripts. The combination of these researcher notes, audio files, and transcriptions were then analyzed using the same constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) that was used in the qualitative content analysis of the study’s media.
content. To re-summarize this process in the context of analyzing interviews, this allowed for an initial round of deductive analysis based on the application of existing theories – agenda building and agenda setting. After the study’s qualitative content analysis was complete, interview notes, audio files and transcripts were re-reviewed and coded again in an inductive manner to find emergent themes and theoretical and conceptual developments. Interview quotes that answered this study’s RQs were then included in the findings section of this study.

**Presentation of the findings from these methods**

To present the findings that developed from the qualitative content analysis and interviews, the section that follows will accordingly use a chronological structure focused on major events associated with Michael Sam’s journey in 2014. Within each major event, results will show how mainstream and queer news outlets, advocacy organizations, and audiences discussed the story, if at all. This presentation of chronological flow, coupled with an examination of sourcing patterns, will show how organizations and individuals appeared to interact with, and respond to, one another regarding Sam’s story. Sections about specific events will analyze how venues framed the event – a frame consisting of the adjectives, descriptives, thematic interpretations, and sources an outlet used in its coverage and conversations.

Some sections have no finite events. For example, an almost three-month period between Sam’s coming out announcement and the NFL draft featured few “newsworthy” events; however, media outlets and others interested in Michael Sam continued to address the story, their conversations covering a wide range of issues. In these sections, coverage will be broken down into thematic categories, highlighting topics that were of public interest and how particular outlets framed those topics.
The format allows for an illustration of the similarities and differences that characterized actions of mainstream and queer media outlets. It also allows for examples of how advocacy organization materials differed in format, depending on the type of public relations information subsidy – such as press releases, social media postings, etc. – being used. Responses from interviews with journalists and advocacy organization personnel will be placed throughout each section, where appropriate.

Finally, as APA citation guidelines remain in flux in regards to ever changing online media information capturing patterns, below is a brief note on how audience comment citations will be documented. This note speaks to both methodological limitations and research ethics. This study captured online audience comments that could have been made on article comment boards or social media pages. The printed APA manual does not offer conclusive instructions on how to properly cite all of these ever changing pieces of communication, but online resources offer suggestions on how best to assist readers in locating the material. As online comments came from a number of sources, sometimes these comments could be posted anonymously, through the use of a fake name, via a non-informative name, or using a real name linked to a real account. In other instances, the audience commenter might have since deleted his or her comment. While APA guidelines allow for “personal communication” to be used in authorless examples that cannot later be traced to the original source, I wanted to supply the reader with as much information as possible about the source of the information. While comments may have been made by fictitious screen names or may have been since deleted, they were not authorless. To promote citation format consistency to account for the diversity of author posts, all comments will use “Audience Comment” as the author. Consistent with APA rules, detailed information about the source of the comment will be found in the References section.
A note should also be made about the ethics of the above decision. While the identity of an individual who posted an online comment is often unknown, an audience commenter’s real name is sometimes shown. For example, ESPN’s comment boards link to a poster’s Facebook profile. Yet, some audience comments could be considered by many readers to be rather vulgar, bigoted or homophobic. It is perhaps for this reason that many posters later deleted their comments. While the intentions of the individual in deleting his or her comments are unknown, this may have been because of a change of heart, harm to his or her societal or professional standing, or other concerns. While this study’s References section offers readers the source of where a comment was made, I feel ethically uncomfortable sharing an audience member’s name, even if available, in hopes of avoiding any placement of shame upon a poster who may no longer wish to make his or her comments public. Therefore, using “Audience Comment” as an author descriptor not only promotes citation consistency but also seems most ethically sound. While the formatting of these citations is consistent with APA guidelines, if the specific name of an individual is not required to answer a study’s RQs, as is the present case, I hope researchers will think critically about when to use an audience member’s real name when citing his or her online comments.
FINDINGS

CHAPTER V: Coming out

This chapter will analyze how media outlets, advocacy organizations, and audiences talked about Michael Sam’s public announcement that he is a gay man. This section will examine how media coverage portrayed Michael Sam right before his announcement, describe the strategy of why, when, and how he came out, and chronicle the initial wave of reaction by mainstream media, queer media, queer advocacy organizations, and audiences. The chapter will end with a discussion of outlets’ initial assessment of Sam’s draft predictions, followed by an exploration into how a pro-Sam video went viral.

Before the announcement: Assessment of Sam’s senior year

The local paper, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, was the only outlet in the sample to cover Sam at the end of his senior year at the University of Missouri. After a well-received season in which Sam was recognized as co-defensive player of the year in the Southeastern Conference, local media recaps of his year highlighted how the strength of his early season performance led him to be double blocked in later games (Matter, 2014a). Sam’s fellow linemen also received great attention, including Kony Ealy, who “played in the shadow of teammate Michael Sam all season” (Matter, 2014b, para. 8). In January, Sam participated in the Senior Bowl, a forum that allows graduating players to show their skills in front of NFL scouts. At that time, the *Post-Dispatch* summarized Sam’s draft prospects by quoting professional scout Russ Lande, who said
that while “some scouts … really like [Sam],” he’d probably be picked in the second half of the draft (Thomas, 2014a, para. 23).

Beyond local stories covering Sam’s end-of-season performance, he received little to no attention from other outlets. The Post-Dispatch reports demonstrated how news coverage focused on Sam’s well-regarded skills as an athlete. No coverage focused on his personal life.

**Reasons for coming out and the media outlets that broke the story**

On the evening of Sunday, February 9th, Michael Sam announced to the world that he is gay. His story was strategically shared in separate interviews with ESPN and the New York Times, as well as a behind-the-scenes piece in Outsports. Sam’s publicist Howard Bragman, a public relations professional with a long history of assisting high profile individuals in their public coming out, guided the strategy (Zeigler, 2014a). Before illustrating how outlets and advocacy groups handled Sam’s coming out, this section will address why Sam chose to come out in February and why Bragman and Sam’s management team selected these specific outlets as semi-exclusive venues for the information. The insights help illuminate behind-the-scenes strategies that affect the agenda-building process. As this section provides background information – not yet addressing the study’s questions about information flow – mainstream and queer outlet content will be combined.

While Sam’s strategic team initially planned for his announcement to come later in the year, Sam revealed his sexuality earlier than his management team thought was ideal because many national media outlets, coaches and professional scouts were either aware – or suspected – that Sam was gay (Zeigler, 2014a). This occurred because Sam had come out to his team during a group exercise at the start of his senior season (Zeigler, 2014a). Local media became aware of
Sam’s sexuality during the fall of 2013, but the outlets never broke the story (Zeigler, 2014a). After Sam’s public announcement, many outlets explained how Sam’s sexuality was handled at Mizzou. The Post-Dispatch reported, “Mizzou kept Sam’s news private all season,” noting how the team had not made Sam available for interviews at Monday press days during his senior season (Matter, 2014c). As the paper noted, Sam had been at least indirectly public about his LGBT-affiliation, as seen in “the rainbow-colored wrist bands he wore on game days” (Burwell, 2014a, para. 2).

During the Senior Bowl in January, NFL scouts had caught wind of the news. The New York Times stated, “At a showcase game for seniors last month, several scouts asked Mr. Sam’s agent, Joe Barkett, whether Mr. Sam had a girlfriend or whether Mr. Barkett had seen him with women,” attempting to get at the rumors of Sam’s sexuality (Branch, 2014, para. 8). Outsports noted, “In contrast, these same scouts asked agents of other players (presumed straight) questions about football, not relationships” (Buzinski, 2014a, para. 20). The St. Louis-Post Dispatch mentioned the media’s awareness as well, “at least one media member confronted Sam about [his sexuality] during a week of practice before the Senior Bowl. Sam declined to comment” (Strauss, J., 2014a, para. 25). Speaking to local knowledge, Rams coach Jeff Fisher admitted the team was “aware of the situation before his courageous announcement” (Thomas, 2014b, para. 3).

A New York Times piece revealed Sam’s agents’ strategy. His agents, Joe Barkett and Cameron Weiss, outlined three options Sam could follow in coming out. He could do so before the combine, between the combine and the draft in late April, or after the draft — be it the next day or at the end of his career. Barkett and Weiss enlisted Bragman, a longtime Hollywood publicist, who has handled the coming out of the former N.B.A. player John Amaechi and Kevin McClatchy, the Pittsburgh Pirates’ former owner. At first, the plan was to make the announcement after the combine (Witz, 2014, para. 32-33).
Because of the scout and reporter rumblings, the management team proceeded as soon as possible with the public announcement, using a strategy that attempted to “limit interviews and endorsements and do not pick up the mantle for gay rights” (Witz, 2014, para. 36).

A day or two prior to the Sunday interviews, Outsports journalist and co-founder Cyd Zeigler joined others at Bragman’s house (Zeigler, 2014a). Openly gay former professional players – including the You Can Play Project’s Wade Davis – and pro-LGBT allied straight players – such as Athlete Ally affiliates Brendon Ayanbadejo and Chris Kluwe – were present to give support and strategic advice. Outsports described the strategic reasons for Bragman’s choice of outlets to break the story. Regarding ESPN, Outsports revealed that Bragman “knew he wanted the TV element to be on” the network, noting that he had “a working relationship with ABC” (Zeigler, 2014a, para. 21). (ABC and ESPN are both owned by the same parent corporation, The Walt Disney Company). In choosing Chris Connelly to do the interview, Bragman “had worked with [him] before and respected his work” (para. 21). ESPN was further chosen because it was “a sports media outlet with a good track record on LGBT sports issues…” (para. 21). Regarding Outsports, Zeigler said Bragman wanted the “behind the scenes” story told (para. 22). Finally, Zeigler described how the Times was chosen. Zeigler said he and Bragman – in looking for a print news outlet – did not want to go the traditional Time Magazine or USA Today route. Since Bragman’s preferred interviewer, Bob Lipsyte, now worked for ESPN, Bragman decided he “[h]e didn’t want one company controlling the TV and print” (para. 26). So, Bragman chose the Times and LGBT-friendly writer John Branch, a journalist who had written about gay athletes (Zeigler, 2014a).

Howard Bragman described how the modern media landscape has changed the way a story builds into broader coverage: “It almost doesn’t matter where you go now. If you’ve got a
big enough story, you can give it to *The Poughkeepsie Journal*, and it will get picked up everywhere” (Mahler, 2014, para. 11). These findings revealed how a story no longer has to develop from the top down. Instead, publicists such as Bragman are able to select specifically targeted outlets that reach pre-selected audiences.

In summary, these findings showed how behind-the-scenes rumblings of both NFL personnel and media outlets led to the strategic timing of the story. These reports demonstrated how a public relations professional strategically selected media outlets – and journalists within those outlets – to break the story in a more controlled manner across the hybrid media system.

**Coming out: mainstream media**

This section will examine how mainstream media covered Sam’s breaking story in the *New York Times* and *ESPN*, as well as the first article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

**ESPN and the New York Times: Breaking the news.** The *ESPN* story broke as *Outside the Lines*’ Chris Connelly filmed a taped interview with Sam that debuted on Sunday, February 9th (Connelly, 2014). Connelly’s corresponding article, which was posted on *ESPN.com*, highlighted how Sam had been open about his sexuality with his teammates. The article used a tweet from openly gay former NBA player Jason Collins as a source, the tweet stating Collins had spent the last two days with Sam in preparation for his announcement. The piece highlighted the agenda-setting ability of Sam’s statement, as it read: “Public reaction has been impressive so far. Within the first hour of his announcement Sam gained over 18,000 Twitter followers” (para. 26). The figures continued to be reported as they grew, “In his first 14 hours on Twitter, which began with a tweet at 8:02 p.m. ET Sunday night, Sam gained 48,821 followers” (Rovell, 2014a,
para. 11). ESPN promoted the breaking story on many of its other platforms, such as ESPN radio (Heard, 2014).

The New York Times piece - released on the same day as the ESPN story – similarly noted that Sam had been open with his teammates (Branch, 2014). From a frame perspective, the article said Sam’s announcement might have a “potential detriment to his professional career,” because of the NFL’s “overtly macho culture, where controversies over homophobia have attracted recent attention” (para. 5). To support the claim, the article sourced a Deadspin column written by former professional punter Chris Kluwe, an athlete who sued the NFL alleging he was fired for his openly pro-LGBT advocacy (para. 9). The article also focused on the cultural impact of Sam’s announcement, arguing, “Mr. Sam could become a symbol for the country’s gay rights movement or a flash point in a football culture war – or both” (para. 6). Finally, the Times piece referenced diversity trainings held at Mizzou, instructed by the advocacy group, The You Can Play Project.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch response to the breaking story called Sam “one of the most celebrated players in Mizzou football history” (Burwell, 2014a, para. 6). Demonstrating the success of Bragman’s agenda-building plan, the responsive paper sourced all three of the special-access pieces – ESPN, the NYT, and Outsports – to shape its early coverage (Matter, 2014c). The article quoted an official statement from the NFL – that was released on the Twitter account of the league’s spokesperson, Greg Aiello – that said the league was proud of “Sam’s honesty and courage” (para. 13). The Post-Dispatch story made it clear that Sam’s publicist planned to henceforth limit Sam’s media availability.

Initial mainstream coverage therefore sourced mainstream and queer outlets, as well as multiple quotes from organizations and individuals that were made on social media.
Mainstream media reaction during the week

This section will examine how mainstream coverage discussed Sam’s coming out the week following his public announcement, breaking down the findings into subsections that demonstrate the sourcing patterns that were used, as well as coverage frames that developed.

Support for Sam: coverage quoting players. A wave of stories was based on the support Sam was receiving from other athletes. Mainstream coverage interacted with NFL players as sources through the use of multiple forms of information subsidies. For example, Colts player Pat McAfee gave a positive statement about Sam to ESPN via text message (Wells, 2014a, para. 3). The same article also referenced a tweet McAfee had posted that was retweeted by hundreds of his followers (McAfee, 2014). This showed how players were able to reach audience members directly without the need of a news outlet. Some players who shared their support for Michael Sam on Twitter had over 1,000 retweets, leading to thousands more audience impressions (Sanders, D., 2014).

Other players had phone or in-person interviews with shows on ESPN, accompanied by coverage that was further distributed on specific ESPN team webpages (Brown, S., 2014). Many articles used sources taken entirely from Twitter comments, such as an article quoting supportive tweets from Richie Incognito and Jonathan Martin, two NFL athletes involved in a bullying scandal that was causing a debate about player conduct and locker room comfort (ESPN.com Staff, 2014). Other national coverage used local mainstream news coverage to obtain player reaction: “Phil Richards of the Indianapolis Star caught up with several Colts to see if they would be willing to accept a gay teammate after Michael Sam publicly acknowledged over the weekend that he’s gay” (Wells, 2014b, para. 1).
The interest in player response was apparent in other ways. As ESPN’s website has many subsections dedicated to specific NFL teams, the story became fodder for many beat writers. Numerous articles sought out what a specific team’s players or staff thought about Sam’s announcement (Cimini, 2014a; Wells, 2014a). The ESPN Bengals page featured comments from the team’s “Players Association representative,” Andrew Whitworth, via a phone interview (Harvey, 2014, para. 6). The article noted how “Whitworth was the only Bengal who spoke to ESPN.com on this issue, although other voices were sought,” indicating how reporters attempted to contact numerous players at each individual team about Sam’s story (para. 6). Like ESPN, articles in the New York Times were sometimes based on quotations entirely or predominantly supplied via players’ Twitter comments (Victor, 2014).

Mainstream coverage therefore heavily relied on player reaction. The means to source these reactions were quite diverse, including Twitter, text messages, phone interviews, on-air interviews, and the use of local coverage. The social media statements of athletes were also able to bypass mainstream news outlets altogether by directly reaching audience members.

**Support for Sam: coverage quoting team and league personnel.** Mainstream outlets were similarly interested in obtaining feedback from team and league personnel, statements that were able to generate entire stories. The quoting of these sources again demonstrated a great diversity in information subsidy tactics within the league. While players were often quoted via their social media statements, team and league personnel were frequently quoted through more traditional forms of information subsidies, such as team statements (Graziano, 2014a). Some officials were sourced through interviews with local press that were then picked up by ESPN. For example, the ESPN Patriots’ page quoted New England owner Robert Kraft via comments he made to the Boston Herald, “[Sam] was co-defensive player of the year in the SEC,” Kraft told
the Herald. “And that was after full disclosure. And that makes me happy” (ESPNBoston.com, 2014). The Green Bay Packers’ coach made comments during a press meeting that was held to discuss other issues (Demovsky, 2014a), and the “49ers general manager Trent Baalke gave the team’s website a statement it tweeted out Monday evening” (Williamson, 2014a, para. 2). Others did not proactively address the statement but reacted to media requests: Denver owner John Elway did not release a formal statement, but offered his thoughts after several requests were made to the team from Denver media” (Legwold, 2014a, para. 9). Finally, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell said, “Good for him,” using NFL spokesperson Greg Aiello's Twitter page to make the comment (ESPN.com News Services, 2014a, para. 2).

League organizations therefore heavily relied on traditional forms of information subsidies, such as official statements or press conferences. Yet, a diverse range of information subsidy tactics was once again apparent.

**Support for Sam: coverage quoting non-sports and/or local individuals.** Non-sports organizations and individuals also obtained coverage of their support for Sam. For example, a tweet from the University of Missouri sharing an image of the football stadium with “S” and “A” drawn into the snow to complement the university’s “M” drew news coverage and obtained over 700 retweets (ESPN.com News Services, 2014b, para. 14). Another article featured comments President Barack Obama made “in a taped interview that aired during TNT’s pregame coverage of Sunday's NBA All-Star Game” (ESPN.com News Services, 2014c, para. 2). Additional articles showed the agenda-building abilities of the mass public on social media: “The reigning SEC Defensive Player of the Year sent shockwaves around the social media-sphere with seven simple, yet courageous, words…” (Maine, 2014, para. 4). Finally, national outlets sought quotes from Sam’s hometown Texas community members (Ganguli, 2014). These communication
activities demonstrated how individuals far beyond the world of sports had the ability to obtain coverage of their comments about Sam.

**Initial negative frames: homophobia, skill level and Sam as a distraction.** While much initial mainstream coverage was positive toward Sam, negative frames began surfacing from some sources. This section will examine from where frames about league homophobia, Sam’s skill, and his status as a distraction developed.

Conversations about whether homophobia still existed in the sport quickly grew. *NYT* columnist Juliet Macur argued that because of homophobia, “[l]ike so many other minorities, Sam will have to work harder to prove his worth. Fans will probably judge him more harshly, and he will have to perform better than other rookies to prove he belongs in the N.F.L.” (2014, para. 5). *ESPn*’s Dan Graziano noted that media covering the league may also be part a problem: “the generational identity of so many NFL decision-makers and media discussion-framers has to be part of the reason gay football players remain reticent” (2014b, para. 3) And *Times* columnist Nicholas Dawidoff brought player homophobia into the discussion, referencing his experiences in NFL locker rooms to note how he

> at times, found the (NFL locker room) atmosphere intensely homophobic. I’d hear people talking about Omar, the shotgun-wielding stickup man on the TV show ‘The Wire,’ how he’d been their favorite character until they learned he was gay and how they couldn’t watch the show anymore (2014, para. 2).

In contradiction to Dawidoff, in another story, the *Times* quoted Chris Kluwe, a former NFL player and member of the LGBT advocacy group Athlete Ally (Drape, Eder and Witz, 2014). Kluwe argued that it was not the players who would be the problem: “They’re there to play football. It’s the general managers and coaches who are going to say it’s a distraction” (para. 70-71).

Some began to argue that Sam would be judged on his skill. Reports started using phrases that teams would “judge Sam solely on ability” (Wright, 2014) or “evaluate him based on his
playing ability and his character” (Demovsky, 2014b, para. 11). A *NYT* piece - “In NFL, It’s Now Question of Ability, Not Orientation” - adopted this frame in its headline (Shpigel, 2014). The *Times* used athlete quotes from Twitter stating that players did not care about Sam’s sexuality but “about winning games and being respectful in the locker room!” (para. 5). This tweet by DeAngelo Williams was also cited on *ESPN* (Newton, 2014a) and retweeted over 2,000 times by social media audiences (Williams, D., 2014).

Sam’s skill became coupled with another frame questioning whether he would be a distraction to a team. For example, the *NYT* demonstrated how some reporting connected the two frames, its coverage asking whether Sam’s “play (could) override” the distraction that might come with his selection (Shpigel, 2014, para. 14). *ESPN*’s Rich Cimini laid out the most explicit argument of the developing skill-versus-distraction frame: “Sam … would attract major media attention wherever he plays, but it would be magnified in a market as large as New York” (2014b, para. 2). He continued, “[T]here's a risk-reward dynamic that goes into every personnel decision … Remember, we're not talking about a blue-chip prospect here; Sam is generally considered a middle-round talent” (para. 3). Sam’s sexuality was also compared to distractions of a very different type as coverage likened him to NFL athlete Manti Te’o, a player who caused a media stir the year prior “after being victimized by a hoax involving a fake dead girlfriend” (Shpigel, 2014, para. 15).

The distraction debate was also present on the team beat pages of *ESPN*. Columns wondered how a media-created distraction would affect their respective teams. For example, the Chargers page argued how a team in its situation “might not want to deal with the media distraction of having an openly gay teammate in the locker room” (Williams, E., 2014, para. 6). Still, not all *ESPN* pages agreed. The Eagles column noted, “Media circuses don’t last, and any
talk that Missouri defensive end Michael Sam will be a ‘distraction’ that affects his eventual NFL employer is mere hyperbole” (Sheridan, 2014, para. 1).

As the distraction frame developed, some voices were used to counter the argument. For example, former coach Brian Billick said Sam’s “orientation obviously wasn’t a big factor in the Mizzou locker room, so [he] can’t imagine it would be any more of an issue in a pro locker room of grown, seemingly mature men” (Shpigel, 2014, para. 18). Yet, ESPN’s Rich Cimini argued the media themselves would make the difference,

Obviously, the Missouri locker room was filled with young players and they didn't let Sam's secret stop them from having a terrific season, but they also didn't have reporters poking microphones in their faces every day, asking their feelings on having a gay teammate (2014b, para. 5).

Cimini summarized how the distraction debate might impact Sam’s draft status: “Ordinarily, a player of Sam's skill set and resume would be a steal in the middle or late rounds. But for the Jets, a Tebow-scarred team with many other needs, it might be best to go in another direction” (2014b, para. 10).

Also countering the initial distraction argument was the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, which had been closer to Sam’s journey during his senior season. Jim Thomas, the Rams beat reporter for the paper, criticized the distraction argument by citing the Rams’ executive director, Kevin Demoff, who spoke of Sam’s time at Mizzou: “There was no distraction and it was not an issue for the team or the player” (Thomas, 2014c, para. 8).

ESPN’s Graziano also argued that individuals who were uncomfortable with Sam because of his sexuality would use multiple frames as cover for their homophobia:

There will be people in positions of power and influence who react badly to this. Those people will justify their reactions with everything from cultural prejudice to religion to haughty NFL pragmatism – i.e., teams will pass on a gay player because they don’t want to be subjected to the extra attention (2014b, para. 3).

Within the distraction frame, comments made by a single player, Jason Vilma, obtained days of coverage and were referenced for the rest of the year. While most players and officials
offered positive sentiments toward Sam, Vilma, a New Orleans linebacker, said: "Imagine if he's the guy next to me and, you know, I get dressed, naked, taking a shower, the whole nine, and it just so happens he looks at me. How am I supposed to respond?" (Triplett, 2014, para. 2).

Vilma’s comments actually pre-dated Sam’s public announcement by about a week, having been stated in an NFL Network piece about the culture of locker rooms (Triplett, 2014). The Vilma comments reappeared after Sam’s Sunday announcement. By Monday, “Vilma said on Twitter that he was appearing on the CNN (Anderson Cooper) program because, ‘I definitely need to clear the air’” (para. 4). The anti-LGBT statements broadened the reach of the first week of coverage as non-sports columnists commented on the negativity. For example, widely read and openly gay Times columnist Frank Bruni concluded his piece by using a quote supplied to him by Outsports’ Cyd Zeigler, who suggested if, ever looked at in the shower, Vilma should respond, “I’m so telling your boyfriend you stole a peek” (2014a, para. 14). Vilma’s comments – and the media’s handling of them – thus made teammate comfort and locker room showers salient to the distraction debate.

In summary, these findings showed how early mainstream coverage focused on frames about league homophobia, perceptions of Sam’s skill, and questions of whether Sam would be a distraction. Many outlets used player or league statements to justify their arguments, these statements often sourced through interviews or social media. Teams themselves promoted these frames by announcing that they were focused on athlete skill. Finally, the Jason Vilma example demonstrated how old quotes made by a single player about locker room dynamics were able to generate broad mainstream media coverage.

**Sam’s cultural significance.** Some mainstream media coverage noted the cultural importance of Sam’s public announcement. For example, Jason Whitlock – a widely read ESPN
columnist who became a fixture of Sam commentaries – wrote about the athlete because Sam’s announcement “heightened [Whitlock’s] awareness of sports' role in our modern society” (2014a, para. 5). Whitlock argued Sam would have profound societal effects:

His most important contribution will be his subtle and important impact off the field. He's going to give gay teenage boys a role model, a hero, a boost to their self-esteem. Sam will further redefine how the rest of us perceive gay men's masculinity. All of this is critical. Sam can push the conversation about gay boys forward. He can give parents, teachers and coaches a talking point to discuss the importance of tolerance. Bullying of gay children is a vast problem in our schools. It contributes to their high suicide-attempt rate (para. 16).

Influential mainstream columns therefore started a discussion about broader societal contexts of Sam’s story.

The agenda-building power of anonymous sources. A single article based on anonymous sources was able to develop a news frame that was used throughout the year. On February 9, *Sports Illustrated* (2014) published reports that quoted eight NFL officials – all anonymously. Peter King, the outlet’s influential NFL columnist, also posted a similar piece (2014a). Counter to the public statements of league officials, the *Sports Illustrated* report found that when speaking anonymously, the tone of feedback toward Sam was much more negative:

‘I don’t think football is ready for [an openly gay player] just yet,’ said an NFL player personnel assistant. ‘In the coming decade or two, it’s going to be acceptable, but at this point in time it’s still a man’s-man game. To call somebody a [gay slur] is still so commonplace. It’d chemically imbalance an NFL locker room and meeting room’ (Sports Illustrated, 2014, para. 3).

These anonymous quotes spoke to many of the aforementioned frames about homophobia and league culture.

The report placed the *distraction* word into the conversation: “If Sam is among that group of players, the potential distraction of his presence -- both in the media and the locker room -- could prevent him from being selected.” A source argued that such a distraction will break a tie against that player. Every time. Unless he’s Superman. Why? Not that they’re against gay people. It’s more that some players are going to look at you upside down. Every Tom, Dick and Harry in the media is going to show up, from *Good Housekeeping* to the *Today* show. A general manager is going to ask, ‘Why are we going to do that to ourselves?’ (para. 11).
The anonymously sourced piece caused a strong debate in other outlets. For example, statements made by DeMaurice Smith – the executive director of the NFL Players Association – in response to the story received much attention (ESPN.com News Services, 2014d). Smith gave an interview to regional outlet CSN Washington, but his comments were picked up in a lead article in ESPN (ESPN.com News Services, 2014d). The article highlighted Smith’s feelings “that any team official who anonymously downgrades Sam is ‘gutless’” (para. 2). The ESPN article built on the comments by connecting them to statements made on another ESPN program: “Smith made his comments on the same day that NFLPA president Domonique Foxworth told ESPN's "Mike & Mike" that the union and NFL players will accept Sam with ‘open arms’” (para. 10). The article obtained thousands of social media shares.

Female ESPN columnist Johnette Howard responded to the anonymous sources by focusing on parallels to issues of gender and sexuality and comparing coverage of Sam to her personal experiences as a young reporter:

A lot of the things that were said then about female sports writers resemble the things being said about Sam now -- or women and gays in the military, for that matter. He'll be a distraction. His mere presence will skew or destroy the work environment. He won't be able to control his sexual impulses. (As if the voluminous texting between Incognito and Martin was about anything but girls and sex when they weren't exchanging gay epithets. Such frequent invoking of heterosexual privilege -- to be as bad as I wanna be -- while gays are expected to remain chaste is a wondrous thing to behold.) (2014, para 9).

Other mainstream outlets addressed the anonymous source story, such as an opinion column in the NYT that argued while, “the National Football League wasted no time issuing a statement that was intended to show how open, inclusive and sensitive it is,” these “anonymous N.F.L. personnel were telling Sports Illustrated that they didn’t think football was ready for an openly gay player” (Rosenthal, 2014, para. 1).

The anonymously sourced piece also demonstrated how public statements might not indicate the true feelings of those speaking. In a similar story, ESPN documented how public sentiments shared by Sam’s Mizzou teammates may have varied from their behind-the-scenes
actions (Merrill, 2014). One of Sam’s teammates, Eric Waters, “took to Twitter” to call out some of his fellow players who he claimed were inauthentic in their public statements, "Half of y'all posting these pics saying how proud you are. But most of y'all was the ones talkin s--- behind his back in the locker room” (para. 7).

These findings demonstrated how sentiments shared in public statements might have differed from behind-the-scenes opinions. Furthermore, a story entirely based on anonymous quotes from league officials – published in a mainstream outlet – was able to drive coverage in other mainstream outlets. In response, issues of gender and sexuality entered mainstream coverage.

**Sam’s upbringing, his father and the impact of story focus.** Additional mainstream coverage focused on Sam’s family and upbringing. Days after Sam’s public announcement, the *NYT* wrote a biographical follow-up documenting his difficulties growing up in a poor Texas family (Drape, Eder & Witz, 2014). While the detailed feature focused on many aspects of Sam’s youth, it included a few quotes from Sam’s father who, upon hearing the news that his son was gay, said: “I couldn’t eat no more, so I went to Applebee’s to have drinks” (para. 9). The frame of parental unhappiness quickly spread to other outlets. Using the *Times* story as its source, *ESPN* made the parental dissatisfaction frame the central focus of its headline: “Michael Sam Sr. Troubled by News” (ESPN.com News Services, 2014e). The *ESPN* story received 33,000 shares, making it one of the more-distributed articles in the study’s sample. The story obtained multiple days of coverage as *ESPN* later led with the story, “Michael Sam’s Father Denies Remarks” (ESPN.com News Services, 2014f). The follow-up story happened because a local Texas paper covered how Sam’s father had denied the comments (ESPN.com News Services, 2014f). Demonstrating the layers of media sourcing that had occurred, *ESPN* summarized, “The (New
York Times, in an email to the Galveston paper, defended its reporting…” (para. 9). Reports on Sam’s father offered an example of how a mere portion of one article could become a driving narrative for a series of articles in other outlets.

Mainstream audience feedback

Many mainstream audience commenters shared complaints about Michael Sam and the media’s coverage of him. While the New York Times and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch pages often had positive feedback toward Sam, the comment sections on ESPN quickly developed indications of audience backlash.

Audiences on media coverage. Some viewers argued discussion of homosexuality on a sports channel was inappropriate:

On the date of February 10, 2014 just as soon as "Sports Nation" ends a man begins barking about how he his gay and black and so on. I could not move fast enough as I tried to change the channel before this became the subject matter of my living room as I was surrounded by three children; their ages are all less than ten years. I would ask as a concerned parent who does not think any component of sex is appropriate for my six year old of any sort. Are we now saying that ESPN is not child friendly? I would appreciate a warning that the following content is meant for mature audiences or the word be bleeped out just as other words that people find lack appropriateness when considered on the common ear. No this is not your networks first time. I would appreciate if it was your last. I have been a fan of ESPN for 20 years but not that I am a parent I can not see myself supporting a network that has no concern for children who are the true fans of sports. Peace (Audience, 2014a).

A potential boycott extended not only to ESPN but also the league as other individuals shared comments in the vein of, if “[h]e gets drafted, no more NFL for me…” (Audience, 2014b). Others complained that all the coverage about a gay athlete was overwhelming: “This is so pathetic. Now ESPN has turned into the Sam Chanel, AKA, the gay network” (Audience, 2014c).

Distractions, locker rooms and the morality of gay players. Many commenters spoke to issues of locker room distractions. “I couldnt be in a locker room with him...,” was a common refrain (Audience, 2014d).
Men go to war together in sports, they don't flirt with each other (unless we are making fun of the idea)... His forcing of his sexual deviance on society is going to cost him some cash (Audience, 2014d).

Many audience members also thought it was inappropriate for straight players to have to play with gay players:

what about the other players on the team. why should they be forced to share a locker room with a person who is attracted to their gender. It's great Mr. Sam is secure with himself and shares it with the world, but I think he should have to be separated from the men in the locker room when it's time to shower and get dressed and undressed... (Audience, 2014f).

Other audiences connected the distraction argument to broader perceptions of sexual minorities:

Teams don't [want] the media circus that comes along with this, that's the bottom line. And who blames them? And then scrutiny for every move they make with every gay player, accused of discrimination, we'll have the 'gay card' now in addition to the 'race card' (Audience, 2014g).

The last significant area of audience complaint regarded a claim that gay individuals come out to obtain special forms of societal treatment: “His motivation to do this tells something. He has more than football on his agenda…” (Audience, 2014h)

While many negative audience comments appeared on ESPN pages, some individuals did share a perspective on the impacts of social media, “If Facebook were around in the '50s, people would be saying the same thing about Jackie Robinson. And then in 1968 about Muhammad Ali. And then in '91 about Magic Johnson. But the world didn't end” (Audience, 2014i).

Societal impact and audience interest. The societal impact of Sam’s public announcement was seen across audience comment boards, best summarized by the highest-rated audience comment on the initial NYT coming-out piece:

Thank you, Michael. I’m gay, and I haven’t mustered enough courage yet to tell my family, but you’ve reassured me that you don’t have to follow the status quo; your sexual orientation doesn’t have to define you as a person.... (Audience, 2014j)

Audience reaction could also be gauged by which stories were most read. The NYT sports page reported, “The five most viewed non-Olympic articles on nytimes.com/sports,” from
February 7\textsuperscript{th} through the 13\textsuperscript{th}. The \textit{NYT} piece, “N.F.L. Prospect Michael Sam Proudly Says What Teammates Knew; he’s Gay” and the follow-up, “Before Coming Out, A Hard Time Growing Up,” were the first and second most-read sports stories on the \textit{Times} that week, respectively (Top, 2014a).

Mainstream audience feedback demonstrated how many mainstream readers – especially on \textit{ESPN} – disagreed with news coverage, often times accusing the media of having a pro-Sam agenda. Yet, audience metrics demonstrated how much interest mainstream readers had in the story.

\textbf{Coming out: queer media}

This section will examine queer media’s coverage of Sam’s public announcement. This includes an examination of the initial \textit{Outsports} special-access story, followed by an inspection of the frames queer media used throughout the week.

\textbf{Coming out: The \textit{Outsports} article.} In addition to Sam’s initial interviews in \textit{ESPN} and the \textit{NYT}, a third special-access piece was published in \textit{Outsports}. The piece – “The Eagle Has Landed” – derived its name from a personal text Sam’s publicist Howard Bragman sent to \textit{Outsports’} Cyd Zeigler on January 20\textsuperscript{th}, almost three weeks before Sam came out publicly (Zeigler, 2014a). “I knew right away what he meant,” Zeigler said (para. 3). As seen by the text, Zeigler had a personal relationship with Bragman, calling him “a friend of mine” (personal communication, March 4, 2015). Still, Zeigler laughed when asked if he still had to argue for special access to the coming out story:

\begin{quote}
Yea. Howard Bragman is a businessman and he’s not going to do anything for his client that isn’t the right thing to do for his client, and, he sa the value in being able to tell the story in kind of a behind the scenes story that, that, yea, I haven’t seen before (personal communication, March 4, 2015).
\end{quote}
Though *Outsports* is a queer outlet, the special-access piece generated over 2,900 tweets, over 9,400 Facebook shares, and almost 900 comments – numbers that far exceeded many posts on *ESPN* or the *New York Times* (Zeigler, 2014a). Unlike mainstream pieces, the *Outsports* article focused on the story behind the story, describing how Michael Sam’s announcement came about.

The *Outsports* article explained how Sam’s management team wanted to separate Sam from LGBT advocacy organizations, allowing him to focus on football (Zeigler, 2014a). In an interview, Zeigler said, “We had told HRC and GLAAD and You Can Play … that they weren’t going to be able to get him for quite awhile…” (personal communication, March 4, 2015). Yet, Bragman addressed how Sam’s individual characteristics could help the movement: “If we were choosing someone to be the first, we’d choose someone like Michael…Smart, athletic, handsome. I don’t think Central Casting could have come up with someone better” (Zeigler, 2014a, para. 58).

Overall, the *Outsports* story demonstrated how personal relationships affected the agenda-building process. The article advanced a frame that Sam was focused on football, and the success of the article indicated significant audience interest among pro-queer readers.

**Distributing Sam’s supplied frames.** Queer media had a propensity to adopt frames that mirrored those advanced by Sam’s management team. For example, queer media ran with Sam’s statement – “I want to own my truth” – as Queerty’s first Sam article was titled: “Michael Sam, NFL Draft Prospect, comes out as gay because he wants to own his truth” (Kinser, 2014). Queerty sourced the news from ESPN and the *New York Times* (Kinser, 2014). The outlet also demonstrated the agenda-building role of advocacy organizations, stating that GLAAD had “notified” Queerty about the NFL’s statement in support of Sam (para. 10). In the days after Sam’s announcement, *Outsports* continued to report on Sam’s focus on football (Zeigler, 2014b).
The outlet quoted Bragman: “We haven't made him available for anything, no outlets, no reporters, not even people who have called who go by one name” (para. 3).

**Societal importance and social chatter.** Queer media discussed the societal importance of Sam’s announcement, similar to some mainstream coverage (Silverman, 2014). *Outsports* made arguments similar to Jason Whitlock, as Bruce Silverman wrote: “When I received the call Sunday evening that Sam was going to ‘come out,’ the magnitude of the situation hadn't quite hit me ... Today, reality has set in. His announcement is a game changer” (para. 4). Describing how cultural discussions were making their way through the media system, Silverman said, “Twitter is tweeting, talk shows are talking, supporters are supporting and haters are hating. Twitter was simply made for this story. Talk shows too.” The broader societal reach of Sam’s story was thus further developed and documented by queer outlets.

**A response to the anonymous sources.** The anonymously sourced *Sports Illustrated/MMQB.com* articles also received much coverage in queer media. *Outsports* (2.12) responded to the *Sports Illustrated* piece, arguing:

And then there are those unnamed team execs that offer backward thinking and do so under the cloak of darkness and unaccountability. One such coward told *Sports Illustrated*, "I don't think football is ready for [an openly gay player] just yet. In the coming decade or two, it's going to be acceptable, but at this point in time it's still a man's-man game.' A man's game? It seems to me Michael Sam is the one being a "man" in this example (Silverman, 2014, para. 7).

While the outlet was critical of the content of the anonymous statements, Zeigler said he was not critical of the journalistic practice of using the anonymous sources:

One of the things that I will say about that whole thing: People are very critical of *Sports Illustrated* using anonymous sources, but the thing is, they won’t talk to you if it’s on the record. They won’t talk to you about personnel if it’s on the record. So, people who don’t really understand about sports media are very critical of Peter King and *Sports Illustrated*, and I was, and I wasn’t really critical of them using anonymous sources. I was upset that they didn’t put any value on what the sources were saying…the sources are telling us they are going to avoid Michael in the draft, this is a problem, but nobody says anything. They just kinda say, whoops, this is the NFL and that’s just the way it is, that was my issue with it (personal communication, March 4, 2015).
Queer audiences used comment forums to further distribute the anonymous source article. A Queerty commenter surmised,

Looks like NFL talks a good game about tolerance but based on the above, it’s all talk. We’ll see what excuses they’re going to come up with if this young guy really does get shafted due to his coming out (Audience, 2014k).

Queer outlet reaction to the Sports Illustrated article demonstrated how anonymous quotes could flow into coverage across media channels. Queer audience members also showed an awareness of mainstream-produced stories.

**The distraction debate and responses to backlash.** Queer outlets also responded to the negative frames that were being developed about Sam in mainstream media – such as the distraction argument and comments made by people like Sam’s father.

In response to the distraction frame, Outsports quoted a straight member of Athlete Ally who shared his feelings on social media: “Don't'e Stallworth summed up my feelings best when he tweeted, ‘If any NFL team can't ‘handle the media coverage’ of drafting Sam, then your team is already a loser on the field ... let me tell you why...’” (Silverman, 2014). Like some mainstream analysis arguing the distraction or skill arguments were cover for homophobia, the outlet commented, Sam “is labeled as a ‘tweener’ and many teams are going to hide behind that as a reason not to select him” (Silverman, 2014, para. 20).

Queerty also focused on the backlash Sam was receiving in many articles. For example, the outlet shared a *Salon* article about Rush Limbaugh’s negative reaction to Sam (Tracer, 2014a). Another piece reported about a Kent State University wrestler who was suspended for tweeting, “I can’t even watch Sports Center today cause all they are talking about is Marcus Smart or that fag from Mizzou…” (Tracer, 2014b, para. 2). Queerty also shared the *New York Times* article that discussed Sam’s father’s comments (Gallagher, 2014a). For its part, Outsports also responded to Sam’s father’s quotes with a guest piece by the father of Cyd Zeigler, the
These findings showed how queer media reacted to many negative frames and stories that not only developed from mainstream news outlets, but also conservative entertainment programs like Rush Limbaugh, as well as individual college athletes’ social media pages. Though queer outlets often combatted these negative frames, their discussion of the frames also furthered the reach of the argumentative points across the hybrid media system.

**Coming out: Advocacy organizations**

Sam’s public announcement caused a significant amount of communication from advocacy organizations. This section will examine the initial communication messages, and means of agenda-building activity, demonstrated by GLAAD, Athlete Ally, and the Human Rights Campaign.

**GLAAD: Sharing Sam’s story.** GLAAD advanced many frames in its coverage of Sam, including discussion of Sam’s skill and character, the cultural importance of his announcement, and Sam’s “focus on football.” In a press release, GLAAD utilized its President and CEO, Sarah Kate Ellis, to focus on Sam’s skills and character: “By rewriting the script of countless young athletes, Michael has demonstrated the leadership that, along with his impressive skills on the field, makes him a natural fit for the NFL” (2014a, para. 2). The release cited the ESPN and New York Times interviews, as well as Zeigler’s Outsports piece. GLAAD’s release promoted the impact Sam’s announcement would have on youth, utilizing Wade Davis – an openly gay former NFL player who is on the executive board of the sports advocacy group, the You Can Play Project. Davis said:
Michael is first and foremost a talented football player. … His story sends a message to LGBT young people, especially young black men, that you are free to show up in the world as your authentic self and others will embrace you” (GLAAD, 2014a, para. 9).

**GLAAD: Sam’s story and self-promotion of the organization**

GLAAD used Sam’s announcement to demonstrate the organization’s own value within the queer rights movement. GLAAD’s blog self-promoted the organization’s work by stating that CEO Ellis was featured in “over 40 media outlets” to talk about Sam, including on *The Huffington Post, MSNBC,* and *USA Today* (Bolles, 2014a, para. 3). The blog linked to several of the news outlets that interviewed Ellis or Wade Davis. Other outlets also used pro-queer advocacy groups and individuals as primary sources (Pelissero, 2014; Zillman, 2014).

GLAAD’s blog said announcements like Sam’s aided advocacy organizations:

> The media buzz around Michael Sam’s coming out presented a substantial opportunity to talk about LGBT people in sports and culture. His coming out received significant media attention, giving GLAAD and partners like You Can Play the opportunity to send a strong message about LGBT inclusion in sports (Bolles, 2014b, para. 1).

GLAAD promoted the blog post on the organization’s Facebook page (2014b).

GLAAD therefore demonstrated how the advocacy organization was able to obtain significant coverage in many different types of outlets – both mainstream and queer. This demonstrated its strong media voice within the movement.

**GLAAD: Promoting frames and GLAAD’s tactics to advance those frames.** GLAAD used many used forums – press releases, social media pages, its website, and public interviews – to add frames into the public discussion. GLAAD publicly shared the message frames it attempted to build into public conversation. The organization stated:

> Some themes that occurred was that professional football is ready for an openly gay player, and that Michael Sam has the opportunity to demonstrate to young LGBT people that they can grow up to be anything they want to be, including an NFL player (Bolles, 2014b, para. 2).

In response to debates about locker room comfort, Sarah Kate Ellis said, “There has been a lot of talk about the locker room, and I think that’s a reliance on an outdated stereotype” (Bolles,
2014b, para. 4). Her arguments used a similar frame to ESPN columnists Johnette Howard’s
discussion of gays in the military: “I remember hearing that argument when ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t
Tell’ was being debated, and we can see now first-hand that gay service members who can serve
openly are only helping the military and it hasn’t been an issue” (Bolles, 2014b, para. 4).
GLAAD therefore attempted to promote its own frames while also responding to frames
disseminated by mainstream outlets.

GLAAD used blog posts to promote news sources that defended Sam by countering the
distraction narrative, such as advancing this coverage from Salon:

In fact, it is Sam’s ability, maturity and performance that led scouting experts to consider him a potential
third or fourth round pick in the NFL draft, and why his coming out has garnered widespread media
attention. So, if a college football team, with young men – straight out of high-school, from different parts
of the country and different backgrounds – can play, lift weights, travel, eat, sleep, win, lose – and yes,
even shower alongside each other – why should anything less be expected of full grown men? (Murray,
2014a, para. 4-5).

GLAAD used the same method to advance pro-Sam news coverage on the organization’s social
media pages, such as sharing Sports Illustrated’s tweet that announced Sam’s placement on
cover of the magazine (GLAAD, 2014c). GLAAD also distributed: tweets initially posted on the
University of Missouri handle (Mizzou, 2014), stories from The Hollywood Reporter (GLAAD,
2014d), and a tweet by President Barack Obama that read, “Congratulations on leading the way, @MikeSamFootball. That's real sportsmanship” (GLAAD, 2014e). The organization therefore
demonstrated a tactic of furthering the distribution of like-minded content created by other
organizations, individuals, or media outlets.

GLAAD’s social media pages also demonstrated the organization’s agenda-building
reach on audience-heavy platforms. GLAAD’s Facebook post that announced Sam’s public
coming out sourced ESPN and was liked by over 1,200 followers (GLAAD, 2014f). Other LGBT
groups, such as TheGayOBX, South Carolina Equality, and the Equality Card Project, as well as
LGBT news sources such as Gay News Pulse, further shared GLAAD’s posts on Sam (GLAAD,
These organizations had thousands of followers of their own. The findings indicated how GLAAD’s content was able to spread through other queer networks on social media.

**GLAAD and an introductory note on Wade Davis.** Wade Davis’s involvement in shaping the Sam story demonstrated the type of behind-the-scenes relationship that affects the agenda-building process. As mentioned, GLAAD partnered with Wade Davis during media interviews (Bolles, 2014b). In addition to his work with the You Can Play Project, Davis has worked with the NFL for over two years to help “educate the front office, their players, [and] the NFL as a whole on how to [make] an inclusive environment for gay athletes…” (personal communication, March 29, 2015). Davis said “Michael Sam’s team had reached out to the NFL” to let the league know that Sam’s public announcement was coming – indicating the league’s awareness of the story before the revelation (personal communication, March 29, 2015). Davis was then brought on board, acting “as a consultant on kinda both sides, like to talk to the NFL about the things they should do and to offer my expertise to Michael Sam’s team…” (personal communication, March 29, 2015). Davis therefore became involved as a person able to work on behalf of advocacy organizations, players, teams and the league, becoming an important figure that shaped Sam’s journey throughout the year.

**Athlete Ally.** Athlete Ally – consistent with its sports focus – was quite active in promoting Sam’s coming out. The organization used many communication mediums to advance Sam’s story. Ally promoted Sam’s announcement on its blog, sourcing the *ESPN* story and stating, “a new era of inclusion in football has arrived” (Athlete, 2014a, para. 3). The organization used a tactic of getting straight allied athletes – such as Brendon Ayanbadejo – to speak publicly in favor of gay athletes (Athlete, 2014b). Beyond having athletes speak on the organization’s own platforms, Ally used them as third-party opinion leaders who could speak to
broader audiences on other channels. For example, a *Time Magazine* column – written to counter the anonymous sourcing in *Sports Illustrated* – sourced an Ally affiliated athlete to speak to the cultural impact of Sam’s declaration:

‘He is opening a lot of doors for other African-American males that are dealing with sexual identity issues,’ says Akil Patterson, youth programs director for Athlete Ally, a gay rights advocacy group, and a former offensive lineman for the University of Maryland (Gregory, 2014, para. 13).

In addition to the use of Ally members, the *Time* article predominantly used Wade Davis as a source and quoted no anti-Sam voices (Gregory, 2014). Other outlets – such as *ESPN* – often used these third-party endorsers as well, resulting in coverage with the following type of citation:

‘I'm telling you, 99 percent of it is that some guys say they fear a gay teammate peeking at them in the shower, or while they're dressing and undressing, which is typical of someone that's not comfortable being around gay men -- and I say that because, unfortunately, I used to be that way,’ says Donté Stallworth, who played in the NFL for 10 seasons and now volunteers as an LGBT advocate for Athlete Ally, an alliance of straight and gay people working together to combat homophobia (Howard, 2014a, para. 10).

Ally developed an initiative to “support Michael” by building an online sign-up page where supporters could show their backing of Sam (Athlete, 2014c). The organization then promoted the campaign across several Facebook posts and tweets (Athlete, 2014c; Athlete, 2014d; Athlete, 2014e). Ally further developed the initiative by partnering with the National Black Justice Coalition (Athlete, 2014b).

Ally therefore demonstrated an approach of utilizing third-party opinion leaders to build and shape content in an array of outlets, including many mainstream venues. The organization also used a strength-in-numbers approach, partnering with other advocacy organizations to broaden its message.

**Ally as a content distributor.** Ally, like GLAAD, used a technique of being its own content distributor via its social media pages. This type of sharing illustrated from where organizations were receiving and redistributing content from. For example, in a tweet announcing Sam’s public coming out, Ally retweeted the news from *ESPN* (Athlete, 2014f).
organization’s other tweets shared articles from *The Huffington Post* (Athlete, 2014e), the *Globe and Mail* (Athlete, 2014g), and other individuals that were supportive of Sam (Athlete, 2014h, Athlete, 2014i). For example, Ally retweeted positive tweets about Sam made by other athletes, such as Deion Sanders (Athlete, 2014j). Similarly, the organization redistributed the University of Missouri tweet showing support for Sam in the snow of its stadium (Athlete, 2014k). Ally also used its social media to distribute content created by its allied opinion influencers, such as Twitter comments by Donte Stallworth (Athlete, 2014l) or news articles that quoted allied members, such as Andy Roddick (Athlete, 2014m) or Erin Sharoni (Athlete, 2014h). The organization further shared the NFL Commissioner’s statement in support of Sam by showing a photo of the statement on Ally’s Facebook page (Athlete, 2014n). Ally also used negative comments about Sam as a catalyst to drive its “support Michael” campaign. For example, the organization used Twitter to highlight *The Huffington Post’s* piece, “18 Disgusting Responses To Michael Sam, Gay Football Star, Coming Out” (Athlete, 2014e). After focusing on the negativity, Ally’s tweet linked to the organization’s “support Michael” initiative (Athlete, 2014e).

In acting as its own content distributor, Ally further distributed material from news entities, as well as non-news individuals and organizations. Ally promoted content from mainstream and queer outlets, as well as social media activity of allied individuals.

**Athlete Ally: a “hands off approach”.** While Ally was fast to celebrate Sam’s story, Hudson Taylor, its executive director, noted how the group “adopted a very hands-off approach” toward Sam himself (personal communication, March, 11, 2015). Taylor argued, “In order for [Sam] to succeed in the NFL, he needed to do as little press as possible. …One of the things we try to keep in mind is that a lot of the people who we are working with are athletes first”
Without access to the athlete, the organization supported Sam by using the above-described means.

The Human Rights Campaign. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) also actively promoted Sam’s announcement. While the organization’s political focus did not match Sam’s story, the HRC’s sheer size and power within the movement meant it was able to build attention toward the athlete. The HRC posted Sam’s public announcement on its blog, highlighting how “brave” Sam was to live “authentically” (Human, 2014a). With over a half a million Twitter followers and over two million supporters on Facebook, the HRC used its social media pages in a similar manner as other advocacy organizations by acting as its own media platform and content distributor. When the organization posted Sam’s announcement on its Facebook page, the post received over 31,000 likes, more than 1,200 shares, and over 500 comments, far more than other advocacy orgs obtained (Human, 2014b). Other groups and media, such as Compete Magazine, an LGBT-sports magazine in the Southwest, further shared the HRC post (Human, 2014b), again showing the agenda-building influence of larger organizations on other advocacy organizations or queer media outlets.

Beyond distributing news media content, the HRC shared the voices of other individuals, such as Michael Sam himself. For example, the organization promoted one of Sam’s early tweets to “thank everybody for their support and encouragement, especially @espn, @nytimes and @nfl” (Human, 2014c) Therefore, large organizations were able to give a stronger voice and presence to Sam by allowing his statements to reach millions of audience members through multiple social media platforms. Finally, similar to Athlete Ally’s social media initiatives, the HRC promoted a “send a high five” campaign where supporters could offer their support for Sam via an online petition (Human, 2014d). In total, the HRC demonstrated the power of its
social media channels, which allowed the org to not only distribute its own content, but also the
content of other news outlets and individuals to the HRC’s millions of followers.

**Advocacy Audiences.** Advocacy org audiences were generally far more positive toward
Sam than comment boards seen on *ESPN*. Audiences also demonstrated their own voices that
went beyond the leads provided to them by their advocacy organizations. For example, while
headlines announced Sam as the first openly gay Division I football player, audience members
noted how, in fact, Sam was not the first: “Sorry…It is important but he wasn’t the first,” said
one commenter, referring to Middle Tennessee State’s Alan Gendreau, a place kicker who was
featured in national media the year prior (Audience, 2014k). Audiences also cited how they had
heard Sam’s news from other outlets: “[h]eard about this young man on LIVE WITH KELLY
AND MICHAEL this am” (Audience, 2014l). This demonstrated how audiences went beyond
sports news outlets to obtain their Sam information. Audience members also shared media
coverage from other outlets, such as a person who linked to *CBS Sports*’ dropping of Sam by 70
spots in its draft predictions immediately after Sam’s announcement (Audience, 2014m).

While most who posted on advocacy pages were quite positive, many supportive
individuals shared a hesitancy about how Sam’s coming out would affect the athlete: “He won’t
be playing long, the players and the league is going to find someway to kick him out…” went
one type of argument (Audience, 2014n). Despite these supporters, some staunchly homophobic
comments were made on advocacy postings. For example, some commenters equated Sam to sin
or the cultural change of youth:

I don’t have to accept it…I really think a lot of youth are saying they are gay just to get attention or just
because they think it is cool…still doesn’t change the fact that it is still a sin! Read the first chapter if
Romans (Audience, 2014o).
This negative sentiment being shared on advocacy organization social media pages appeared to demonstrate how anti-queer people read and engaged with the story through interactions with pro-queer audience members on social media platforms.

**Two additional insights from Sam’s public coming out week**

The remaining sections of this chapter will offer two additional agenda-building insights gained during Sam’s coming out week: initial assessments of Sam’s draft stock and an example of how a local commentary went viral.

**Coming out and initial draft stock.** Across all channels – mainstream, queer and advocacy – was discussion of a topic that was debated for months: in what round would Michael Sam get drafted? Predictions of Sam’s draft status served as a barometer of agenda building as the variations in predictions could be mapped to which topics, frames, individuals and media outlets were involved with a particular forecast. At the time of his announcement, Sam was generally perceived to be a mid-round choice. (For perspective, there are seven rounds in the NFL draft, each round consisting of 32 picks.) In its coming out report, *ESPN* stated Sam was “likely (a) mid-round pick, with some saying [he] could go as high as the third round” (Connelly, 2014, para. 27). The *NYT* reported, “While Mr. Sam’s pro prospects are far from certain, several N.F.L. draft forecasters have predicted that he will be chosen in the third round” (Branch, 2014, para. 17). Mainstream media’s assessment thus relied on predictions from scouts and media analysts, often their own. In terms of queer outlets and organizations, *Queerty* said Sam was likely “to be chosen during the early rounds of the NFL draft…” (Kinser, 2014, para. 2) and GLAAD’s initial press release sourced *Outsports’* Cyd Zeigler who stated, “[e]very NFL draft expert has Sam being selected in the first to fifth round…” (GLAAD, 2014a, para. 5). The initial
web posts from the HRC and Athlete Ally said Sam was likely “to be a top pick” (Human, 2014a, para. 1) or “a high round draft pick” (Athlete, 2014a, para. 3), respectively.

While most outlets started in near agreement of an early or mid-round selection, one analysis gained much attention. On February 10th, Outsports ran a piece noting, “Hours after Michael Sam came out openly as gay, a CBS Sports draft board had him dropping from its 90th-ranked player to its 160th ranked” (Outsports, 2014a, para. 1). Mainstream press, including the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, covered this ranking change (Miklasz, 2014a). Some outlets argued, predictions like those by CBS Sports countered historical reality as it was noted how “the past seven SEC defensive players of the year have been taken in the first round” (Babb, 2014a). The CBS predictions were thus media-created analysis that caused significant reaction in other outlets. How organizations used sources, expert opinions, and statistics in their draft forecasts became an example of how the selection of information shaped broader perceptions of Michael Sam during his journey.

Dale Hansen and an example of going viral. While many outlets covered Sam’s coming out announcement, one sportscaster learned what it was like to become a 2014 viral sensation. Dale Hansen, a local television commentator in the Dallas broadcast market, offered his analysis of Michael Sam’s coming out on the Monday evening broadcast of WFAA’s program (D. Hansen, personal communication, March 19, 2015). To show the flow of how the video spread over the next few days, coverage from all outlets will be combined.

Hansen’s on-air speech on February 10th stated, in its entirety:

It was quite a weekend. That little dust-up in Lubbock Saturday night, and then on Sunday, Missouri's All-American defensive end Michael Sam the SEC’s defensive player of the year and expected to be a third to fifth-round pick in the NFL draft tells the world he's gay. The best defensive player in college football's best conference only a third to fifth round NFL pick? Really? That is shocking, and I guess that other thing is, too. Michael Sam would be the first openly gay player in the NFL; says he knows there will be problems... and they've already started. Several NFL officials are telling Sports Illustrated it will hurt him on draft day because a gay player wouldn't be welcome in an NFL locker room. It would be uncomfortable, because that's a man's world. You beat a woman and drag her down a flight of stairs,
pulling her hair out by the roots? You're the fourth guy taken in the NFL draft. You kill people while driving drunk? That guy's welcome. Players caught in hotel rooms with illegal drugs and prostitutes? We know they're welcome. Players accused of rape and pay the woman to go away? You lie to police trying to cover up a murder? We're comfortable with that. You love another man? Well, now you've gone too far! It wasn't that long ago when we were being told that black players couldn't play in 'our' games because it would be 'uncomfortable.' And even when they finally could, it took several more years before a black man played quarterback. Because we weren't 'comfortable' with that, either. So many of the same people who used to make that argument (and the many who still do) are the same people who say government should stay out of our lives. But then want government in our bedrooms. I've never understood how they feel 'comfortable' laying claim to both sides of that argument. I'm not always comfortable when a man tells me he's gay; I don't understand his world. But I do understand that he's part of mine. Civil rights activist Audre Lord said: 'It is not our differences that divide us. It's our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.' We've always been able to recognize 'em. Some of us accept 'em. And I want to believe that there will be a day when we do celebrate 'em. I don't know if that day's here yet. I guess we're about to find out. But when I listen to Michael Sam, I do think it's time to celebrate him now (WFAA, 2014).

Hansen’s arguments focused on many of the frames presented so far in this chapter. He argued in favor of Sam’s skill and responded to the anonymous rumblings that were shared in the *Sports Illustrated* piece. The comments also attacked the distraction argument.

The Hansen video obtained little to no prominent attention on *ESPN* or the *NYT*, demonstrating how commentary could be widely viewed throughout the hybrid media system, even without mainstream coverage. On February 12th, Hansen’s speech was shared by Queerty, its headline reading, “Amazing straight sportscaster celebrates Michael Sam, blasts NFL homophobia” (Queerty, 2014a). GLAAD posted the piece on its blog (Townsend, 2014a) and promoted it on Twitter (GLAAD, 2014h). *Outsports* exclaimed, “Must Watch! Texas TV commentator Dale Hansen on celebrating diversity & Michael Sam” (Zeigler, 2014c.) All three venues shared a Youtube video of the speech that was posted on the *MyDailyWorldNews* channel (MyDailyWorld News, 2014).

The next day, the story was shared by the HRC on its Twitter feed (Human, 2014e), Facebook page (Human, 2014f) and blog, the organization stating, “Texas Sportscaster Blasts Michael Sam’s Critics in Viral Video” (Simon, 2014). With the HRC’s massive social media following, its Facebook post obtained over 5,000 likes (Human, 2014f). Indicating how the video
spread, audience commenters noted, “I am sharing this video with everyone I know! Dale Hansen could not have said it better, Bravo! #SpeakTheTruth” (Audience, 2014q). Speaking to the viral element, one commenter said, “Nearly 1.5 million views and counting while it lights up my news feed” (Audience, 2014r). By the end of the next day, the video had obtained over 2.3 million views (Horn, 2014).

While many outlets promoted the story, daily talk show host Ellen DeGeneres was perhaps the biggest catalyst in helping spread the video across media platforms. On the 12th, DeGeneres had posted the video on her Twitter account, suggesting that her followers watch the footage (DeGeneres, 2014a). With over 43 million followers at the time of this study, DeGeneres is one of the ten most followed Twitter users in the world. After tweeting about the video, DeGeneres then flew Hansen out to Los Angeles to tape a segment on her television program (personal communication, March 19, 2015). Hansen’s interview aired on DeGeneres’s Friday show (personal communication, March 19, 2015). Thus, over the span of the week, Hansen’s video - and therefore the statements and frames he made within it - were shared more and more. The MyDailyWorldNews Youtube video alone garnered over 4.9 million views (MyDailyWorldNews, 2014), not to mention the broader reach of the official video in local markets, the viewing audience on DeGeneres’s show, and promotion of the content on other outlets.

The Hansen video demonstrated how outlets beyond traditional news sources caused a topic to be widely seen. Queer news outlets, advocacy organizations, and prominent entertainment individuals were able to help garner millions of views for a video that spoke strongly against much of the coverage that was developing in mainstream sports outlets. Many media platforms were used in the process, ranging from organizational social media pages to a
daytime television program. Yet, it all started with a local news broadcast, supporting Howard Bragman’s argument that modern day stories can be built from many different starting points in the hybrid media system.

Chapter V conclusion

Many initial answers to the research questions of this study were found in this chapter. All news outlets – both queer and mainstream – sourced other outlets, be they mainstream or queer, sports or news, entertainment or politics. The people or organizations sourced within stories were quite diverse. There were notable differences in the types of information subsidies used. For example, more official sources were often sourced through more traditional forms of media relations while news outlets often sourced individuals through means such as social media or phone texts. Advocacy organizations demonstrated their ability to act as their own media content channels, able to reach many followers without the aid of any news coverage. Some orgs were able to use third-party opinion influencers to help obtain broader-reaching media coverage. Finally, audiences showed a propensity to not only read multiple outlets to obtain their news, but they also used multiple media platforms to then share content of their choosing.
CHAPTER VI: Sam’s spring

This chapter will examine media coverage and advocacy communication regarding Michael Sam from mid-February to early May of 2014 – the period between Sam’s public coming out on February 9th and the NFL draft. This stretch was not focused on a single event, demonstrating more diversity of coverage. This chapter will specifically review media coverage and advocacy communication of Sam’s NFL combine and Pro Day experience; assessments of league homophobia and Sam’s skill; continuing debates about Sam as a distraction; questions of when and where Sam would be drafted; promotion of individuals critical of Sam; queer-centered coverage relating to race and sexuality; sharing of pro-Sam commentary; the role of gossip; and the ability for audiences to have a say in communication flow.

The NFL combine

After Sam’s coming out, the next big step was his athletic performance – and the reviews of that performance – at the NFL combine, an event held in late February. The combine is an annual occurrence that allows players to show off their skills to league scouts, each team having representatives in attendance. There is also a throng of reporters who attempt to interview players at organized press conferences. With Howard Bragman and Sam’s agents shielding him from media interviews prior to the combine, the event not only served as a test for Sam’s athletic abilities, but also included his first – and only significant – full press event before the NFL draft. The event thus served as an important opportunity for Sam to show that he was not only good
enough to be in the league but also demonstrate how he could handle potential media-created distractions.

The press conference: February 22nd

Mainstream media. On February 22nd, Sam held a press conference in front of a mass of reporters at the combine. In their resulting coverage, mainstream media complimented Sam’s speaking skill, addressed his desire to be known simply as a football player, covered the role the media themselves played in the distraction debate, assessed what type of athletic performance was required, noted Sam’s wardrobe, and referenced league homophobia.

Speaking to the media-centric nature of the event, ESPN reported, “Some long-time attendees of the NFL combine estimated that the crowd of reporters around former Missouri defensive end Michael Sam was the largest media gathering around a single player they had ever seen” (Demovsky, 2014c, para. 1). The outlet also noted the multimedia nature of the modern press avail and complimented Sam on his handling of it: “[W]hen Michael Sam…stood before a huge array of cameras, digital recorders and smartphones sending his image to Twitter on Saturday at the NFL’s scouting combine, he simply owned the moment” (Legwold, 2014b, para. 2). Other analysts on ESPN were similarly glowing in their reviews, as writer John Clayton stated, “I'd have to rank Michael Sam's news conference as maybe the second best I've been around” (Clayton, 2014a, para. 3). The New York Times wrote that Sam’s performance was “composed, confident and at ease…” (Strauss, B., 2014a, para. 3).

Sam presented a strategic message that stressed his desire to be known foremost as a football player, a frame picked up by ESPN’s Jets’ page: “Sam was confident, yet not cocky, projecting the image of a young man who just wants to play football” (Cimini, 2014c, para. 11).
ESPN also noted Sam’s response relating to his status as a potential figurehead of the LGBT movement: “Asked if he feels like a trailblazer, Sam said, ‘A trailblazer? I feel like I’m Michael Sam’” (Clayton, 2014a, para. 4). The NYT coverage similarly emphasized Sam’s statement: “I just wish you guys would just see me as Michael Sam the football player instead of Michael Sam the gay football player” (Strauss, B. 2014a, para. 4).

ESPN’s coverage also spoke to issues of distractions, as John Clayton noted that the media themselves were responsible for some of the distractions:

Baltimore Ravens general manager Ozzie Newsome made a great point Saturday. He said locker rooms adjust but sometimes it takes the media a longer time to adjust and move on from a situation. He's right. The media ask questions until another topic creates new areas for questioning. As we found out with the Te'o catfishing story last year, the questioning didn't change until he started playing games (Clayton, 2014a, para. 8).

The Times used an interesting choice of words by focusing on the strategic aspect of the league’s public statements. The outlet wrote, “N.F.L. general managers, coaches and players have been on message in the past week, universally praising Sam, welcoming him to the league and playing down any notion that he could be a locker room distraction” (Strauss, B. 2014a, para. 7).

From an athletic perspective, Clayton focused on how Sam would need to perform at the event: “[T]o justify being a mid-round choice,” Sam needed “to run a 40 time under 4.65” seconds (Clayton, 2014a, para. 11). A player’s 40-yard run is a key statistic sports outlets like to report to efficiently quantify a player. Clayton’s claim that a singular stat such as an athlete’s speed on one sprint on one day set up an argumentative frame about the importance not only of a singular event but also a single performance within that event.

Sam’s decision to wear a rainbow “Stand With Sam” button at the event was also highlighted by both the Times and ESPN (Strauss, B., 2014a, para. 2; Legwold, 2014c, para. 2). This demonstrated the media’s willingness to report on Sam’s choice of clothing accessories, and
it also showed how Sam’s decision to make a statement via his accessories was addressed by these outlets.

At the local level, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* commented on the strong media interest in the story, Sam’s desire not to be a “trailblazer,” and his decision to wear the “Stand with Sam” button (Thomas, 2014d, para. 37).

**Queer media.** *Outsports* fully documented Sam’s conference, focusing on his skills in presenting, coupled with a discussion of his focus on football (Buzinski, 2014b). *Outsports* summarized Sam’s presentation skill by writing, “If Michael Sam handles blockers the way he handled the media at the NFL Combine today in Indianapolis, he has a bright playing future ahead of him” (para. 1). Writer Jim Buzinski continued that Sam “said all the right things and was never rattled. He smiled throughout and showed a ton of poise. He said his focus is football and being drafted, not being an activist.” *Outsports* ’ headline further addressed the notion that Sam was focused on being employed as a professional athlete: “Michael Sam: ‘I just wanna do what I love to do and that’s play football’” (Buzinski, 2014b).

**Audiences.** By the press conference, some audience comments on *ESPN* already pointed to a fatigue among readers, some of whom equated Sam’s coming out to societal opportunism:

> I get so incredibly tired of this nonsense. Michael Sam’s contribution to the NFL to date was a self-serving political statement in which he-depending on who you believe-sandbagged his parents-he has every right to play but of about 2,000 players eligible for the draft he is the only one that has led with his sexuality (Audience, 2014s).

These sentiments showed the longevity of audience memory of how Sam’s father felt about his son, an element of Sam’s story driven in *ESPN*’s earlier headlines that were discussed in Chapter Five. In a response to media coverage’s frequent description of the rainbow wardrobe accessory Sam wore, one audience commenter argued,

> If you really wanted to be known as the football player and not the gay football player then why would you show up in gear marketed toward LBGT with their colored rainbow and a pro-gay rights slogan with your name in it? (Audience, 2014t).
In summary: Combine press conference. The combine press conference demonstrated a rare instance in which media outlets were in unison regarding Sam’s performance. Each outlet shared Sam’s messaging that he just wanted to be considered a football player, though this was to varying levels of success in mainstream presses. With Sam at the podium, most coverage used him as a primary source, coupled with feedback from team and league officials. Mainstream outlets also discussed other topics, such as how the media themselves could cause their own distraction with media-created events. ESPN provided a frame that argued a player’s skill could be summarized by a set of performance measures at a singular event. Finally, mainstream audiences demonstrated memory of story elements promoted by mainstream news weeks prior to the press conference. Advocacy organizations were not actively involved during the combine.

Sam’s athletic performance

While Sam’s media skills were routinely complimented, his athletic performance following the press conference faced varied reviews.

Mainstream media. Mainstream outlets had mixed-to-negative feedback on Sam’s performance. Despite the media focus on the combine, a debate developed questioning how much value scouts actually placed on the event. ESPN led with an argumentative sub-head, “If Michael Sam drops in draft, it won't be because of his (coming out) announcement” (Clayton, 2014b, para. 6). ESPN continued, “Sam didn't wow anyone with his workouts Monday” (para. 6). Sam’s 40-yard dash time (at 4.91 seconds) was a far cry from John Clayton’s previous barometer of 4.65 seconds as being a goal for a mid-round choice (para. 6). ESPN’s view of his status a few weeks from his coming out announcement was aptly summarized as follows:
Everyone is rooting for him to be judged as a football player. Based on his numbers Monday, though, he might not go as high as he would like. Because he is considered more of a situational pass-rusher, his value is between the fourth and sixth rounds. A good workout could have put him into the third round (para. 6).

The *Post-Dispatch* was similarly underwhelmed by Sam’s performance, its responsive analysis being headlined, “Michael Sam’s combine workout disappointing” (Thomas, 2014e). In its analysis, the paper argued, “The eagerly awaited workout for … Sam … did nothing to help his draft stock, and may have hurt it” (para. 1).

*ESPN*’s SEC college football page was a little more forgiving in its review, calling it a “so-so” performance and noting how past exposure to Sam’s skill level may affect a review:

> My take, after watching Sam come through repeatedly last season for the Tigers, is that he will find a way to make an impact at the next level...he's too active and too determined not to be a contributor for an NFL defense” (Low, 2014, para. 6).

Importantly, this section of *ESPN* noted how, in its view, the combine is just a small piece of a much larger puzzle when evaluating a player’s potential draft stock and NFL status:

> Sure, his draft stock might take a hit because of his combine performance. But he also has the tape, and his tape from last season speaks for itself. He was a clutch playmaker for the Tigers, and it wasn't as if he was facing mediocre offensive tackles on a weekly basis (Low, 2014, para. 7).

The ongoing debate about Sam’s skill thus took on an additional layer. Would a singular event such as his combine performance become the leading indicator? Or, would other factors, such as his longitudinal performance and SEC honors trump this factor? To answer this, *ESPN* had a piece titled, “No more, no less, combine still puzzle piece” (Legwold, 2014d). The article sourced Broncos owner John Elway to note that the combine itself was only a segment of the analysis:

> Overall, it’s just part of the big picture. Decisions are made by the work the scouts have done all year getting to know these guys, on the road and by what they've done on the field. ... The combine is one of the things you consider (para. 4).

Similarly, the GM of the Atlanta Falcons noted the longitudinal nature of the assessment, commenting, “It’s up to us to rely on all of the information that we’ve gotten over the last 12, 13, 14 months” (para. 7). The article continued by putting the combine litmus test into evaluative
perspective: “In the end, however, no matter how often 40-yard dash times are thrown into the public domain or vertical jumps mulled over, the games still mean the most” (para. 15). This argument countered media narratives created during events such as the combine that produce efficient but simplistic measures to report on, such as the highlighting of a player’s 40-yard dash. Nonetheless, the media’s consideration of Sam’s combine performance as a key factor in predicting his draft status become one of the primary benchmarks later used to analyze Sam’s ultimate draft results.

Queer media. On the perspective of skill, Outsports called Sam’s showing “subpar” (Zeigler, 2014d, para. 2), and used his 40-yard dash time to say how he was “ranked … 19th out of 42” among lineman (Buzinski, 2014c, para. 2). The outlet further offered quotes from analysts at Yahoo and The St. Louis Post-Dispatch to summarize its arguments. The venue cited Yahoo’s take that Sam was “stiff” but “appears driven to prove himself as a football player despite lacking ideal physical traits” (para. 4). In using local knowledge from St. Louis’ Bryan Burwell, the outlet focused on Burwell’s comments that Sam’s “going to be a guy who can help a football team. I don’t care what anybody says -- that was a distracted Michael Sam out there” (para. 5). Similar to some of the arguments made in mainstream outlets, Outsports highlighted how the combine should not be over-emphasized:

Combine performance is not the be-all and end-all for draft prospects. Teams use it to get a sense of a player in private interviews, looking for red flags and warning signs. The drills are not unimportant, but the league is filled with players who struggles at the Combine for one reason or another (para. 6).

Audiences. The combine served as a gauge of audience reaction a few weeks removed from Sam’s public coming out announcement. Two weeks into coverage, some ESPN audience members continued to attack the outlet for “beating a dead horse...” and complained about gay athletes’ decisions to come out:
Seriously, if being gay is so normal why do gays feel the need to shove this in our faces all time? Be gay, whatever...no one wants to hear about it. This guy seriously craves attention, as do the rest that feel the need to “come out”... (Audience, 2014u).

This criticism got pushback from other audience members who claimed it was not Sam’s fault:

Dude it's the media who is making this a big deal, not Sam. There were more cameras at his combine presser than Manziel this year and Te'o last year. It's pure judgment and ignorance on your part to say Sam is shoving his sexuality in our faces (Audience, 2014v).

In this audience exchange, 216 other ESPN audience members ‘liked’ the original negative comment while the pro-Sam response obtained 127 ‘likes’ (Audience, 2014v).

Meanwhile, some queer outlet audiences demonstrated how they read mainstream sports outlets for Sam coverage: “Sadly, SI.com’s article … is already starting to be filled up with hateful comments. Maybe this could be an opportunity to let SI’s readers know that such attitudes are no longer welcome in a civilized society – even in the sports world” (Audience, 2014w).

**In summary: Combine athletic performance.** Both mainstream and queer media outlets generally described Sam’s athletic performance at the combine as mixed. Yet, another frame argued the combine was just part of a much larger assessment process. To support this claim, mainstream and queer outlets cited league staff, such as owners and scouts. At the audience level, while the combine focused on Sam’s performance, many mainstream audiences were still discussing Sam as a distraction. Conversely, queer media audiences showed a propensity to read both mainstream and queer news assessments of Sam. The combine thus acted as a media-centric event, resulting in significant news coverage with a debatable amount of athletic assessment value.
A diverging spring

The coming out story and the combine were singular and distinct events for which news coverage could easily be analyzed separately. The following section will analyze the rest of the spring time period by using thematic subsections to demonstrate how media, advocacy sources, and audiences discussed elements of Sam’s journey that were not strongly tied to a singular event, but instead focused on a series of minor events, cultural discussions, and quotes from individuals that would shape conversations.

Spring: Sam a distraction? Or is the league homophobic?

The debate about whether Sam was a “distraction” developed in many ways during the spring. A counter-frame also developed, arguing that the league – and even the media themselves – may have homophobic elements, perhaps leading to the use of the distraction argument as a cover.

Mainstream media. In February, mainstream outlets started to more carefully analyze the distraction argument. In one piece, ESPN’s NCAA page featured the distraction debate by sourcing a local article from Missouri’s Columbia Daily-Tribune (Khan, Jr., 2014). The Tribune used Athlete Ally member Brendon Ayanbadejo as its lead source to discuss how teams focus on football, not personal issues (Morrison, 2014a). The article also sourced a former “NFL scout and general manager” who said any distraction would be “(t)hrough no fault of [Sam’s] own…” (para. 7). The scout called it a “media onslaught” that would occur for whichever team drafted him (para. 7).

While those in the league were making public statements in support of Sam, some coverage discussed whether this was potentially a cover for behind-the-scenes homophobia. Still
in February, *ESPN*’s SEC page cited queer media and queer-allied athletes associated with Athlete Ally to drive some of its coverage on the topic (Ching, 2014). *ESPN* again sourced *The Columbia Daily Tribune* in a piece that quoted *Outsports*’ Cyd Zeigler, as well as Chris Kluwe and Brandon Ayanbadejo, athletes affiliated with Ally (Morrison, 2014b). In the coverage, Kluwe was used to highlight how,

> [t]he owners, GMs, front-office people tend to use the players as a shield to push their own biases and discriminatory practices on players so that they don't have to come flat-out and say, ‘We don't want a gay player on our team.’ They know they can't say that now. In our modern society, we've decided we don't want discrimination (para. 37).

Ayanbadejo was utilized to compare Sam’s situation to Jackie Robinson’s in the 1940s (Morrison, 2014b). This sourcing pattern was common: these queer sources were often quoted in local Missouri coverage, news that was then picked up by national outlets. Therefore, while *ESPN* was not often citing queer outlets and supporters directly, its coverage of local news sources like the *Tribune* meant that pro-queer voices ultimately ended up in multiple *ESPN* pieces.

Coverage was occurring as media continued to vet a well-discussed Miami Dolphins bullying scandal (Fox, 2014). While much of this coverage focused on hazing actions between players, the investigation drew attention for concluding that coaches were also involved in the bullying, including the use of homophobic pranks (Fox, 2014a). *ESPN* reported, “Dolphins offensive line coach Jim Turner … gave all of the lineman gift bags that included inflatable female dolls. Except Turner gave [one player] an inflatable male ‘blow-up’ doll” (para. 9). These stories gave credibility to comments such as those made by Chris Kluwe that coaching staffs may have their own sexuality-related problems when it came to Sam.

The bullying article, written by Ashley Fox (2014a), served as a great example of how *ESPN* audiences were often in conflict with its female journalists. The piece received many
comments that criticized Ms. Fox’s connection of the Miami bullying reports to Michael Sam. “Way to swing what was a story focused on bullying and the Dolphins into yet another gay rant. Congrats Ashley Fox on yet another laughable moment in ESPN reporting history,” one commenter said (Audience, 2014x). “And the feminization of this country continues,” another said (Audience, 2014y). A third commented that Fox should be writing for the women’s arm instead: “God, shut up Ashley, start writing for ESPNW. …. O'well, another gay day at ESPN, keep pushing the agenda, maybe football will become more like a crafting party that middle aged women enjoy, they all of ESPN can rejoice” (Audience, 2014z).

ESPN also developed the debate about player and/or league homophobia by citing survey results. On February 17th, ESPN’s main NFL page had the headline, “86 percent okay with gay teammate” (Goessling, 2014). ESPN therefore concluded that Sam was “walk(ing) into a league that seems to be moving closer to acceptance but is still dealing with growing pains as it does so” (para. 1). To explain its methodology, ESPN noted that it distributed an “anonymous survey” to players following Sam’s announcement (para. 2). The coverage said, “Fifty-one players, almost an entire team roster, responded to four true-false questions” (para. 2). Notably, one of the questions ESPN decided to include asked players whether “they would be comfortable showering around a gay teammate” (para. 3). Thirty-nine of the fifty-four players said yes (para. 3). Yet, the survey reported that “32 players said they had teammates or coaches who used homophobic slurs last season, and when asked whether an openly gay player would be comfortable in a NFL locker room, just 25 players said yes…” (para. 3). Some audience members noted potential problems with such reporting, which used a non-random 54-person sample to generalize to the entire NFL:

I guess ESPN's agenda is to skew the public's outlook on this subject by saying that the majority of a small sample of NFL players will accept gays in the locker room. This is a tactic the media plays when they are pushing an agenda (Audience, 2014aa).
Queer media. After about a month of these debates about distractions and homophobia, *Outsports* posted a piece criticizing much of the media coverage up until that point (Zeigler, 2014e). The article argued much of the coverage focusing on player discomfort in the locker rooms was off base. “Sure, guys can be pretty nasty and heterosexist when left alone,” the article noted, “but that's before an athlete comes out on the team. Once they have an openly gay athlete in the mix, the environment improves every time. Every. Time” (para. 17). *Outsports* also noted how Sam’s focus during the spring remained entirely on football, in line with the media strategy of his publicist and agents (Zeigler, 2014f). “Sam came out publicly all on one day, then refused every interview since the day his story was released and focused on football,” the outlet wrote (para. 13). To justify its arguments, the outlet cited support from Jason Licht, the general manager of the Buccaneers: "I really appreciate that about him. … He had to get it out at some point, he did it at the right time. Now he can focus on getting better. The pressure is off of him now" (para. 14).

Advocacy groups. Athlete Ally continued to use its relationships with straight athletes to help promote guest columns to counter the arguments that were being made about a gay athlete being a distraction. In an *MMQB.com/Sports Illustrated* piece, straight ally NFL player Connor Barwin argued Sam “will not only be accepted in an NFL locker room, he will make it stronger” (2014, para. 4). Barwin spoke of football as a unique environment for cultural change, as the sport “is a game where people from all walks of life come together for a common cause, and the game has the unique ability to serve as ground for social progress” (para. 5). Barwin concluded that NFL athletes, as teammates, share a special bond, meaning that any distractions would be the result of the media, not a player’s sexuality in the locker room (para. 5). Ally, by partnering
with straight athletes who were used as third-party opinion leaders, was thus able to have a voice in mainstream coverage, even if it was not sourced directly.

**In summary: Spring debate of distraction versus homophobia.** The “gay athlete as a distraction” debate was a salient frame throughout news coverage during the spring. Mainstream coverage continued to discuss the potential distractions, while queer media were quite reactive to these suggestions. Queer outlets, as well as advocacy groups, continued to have a voice in mainstream coverage, primarily through local media, which was picked up by national mainstream outlets such as ESPN. Athlete Ally and like-minded straight athletes continued to have a strong voice, writing guest columns in large outlets and being quoted in local press. Finally, many mainstream audiences offered criticism of not only Sam but also the reporting of female journalists at ESPN.

**Pro Day**

Debates about Sam’s level of skill – and which factors affected his perceived level of skill – occurred over the course of several weeks. The selection of sources, from persons to statistics, had a great effect on coverage.

**Mainstream media.** While Sam’s mediocre combine performance received great attention, his Missouri Pro Day demonstrations received far less coverage from ESPN. Pro Days occur when universities show off their athletes who are attempting to make it into the league; all NFL teams reportedly sent their scouts to Mizzou to watch athletes run a series of tests comparable to the combine (Associated Press, 2014a). In its coverage, ESPN published a wire report from the Associated Press (Associated Press, 2014a). The article noted how Sam had
improved in every test since his combine, including a much faster 4.69 second 40-yard dash (para. 3).

Following Pro Day, an ESPN column by Jeffri Chadiha noted how “Sam has done all he can” (2014a). Yet, the tone of much of the coverage had changed. What once was considered a “so-so” combine performance from some at the news outlet was now being called a “disastrous effort at last month’s combine” (para. 1). While the featured column noted that Sam “came away with more encouraging results Thursday…” (para. 2), it continued, “We've reached the point where we officially can say that Sam is an ordinary athlete at best” (para. 3). Suddenly, the outlet claimed, “Whether he even gets drafted still remains a real question,” in stark contrast to earlier reports (para. 6). Some discussion did mention that Sam’s performance had limitations due to a hamstring injury he encountered during Pro Day (para. 2). While many anti-Sam comments filled the discussion board, one audience member noted that columnists and journalists themselves could have an anti-gay agenda:

There is so much homophobia in the sports media which goes unchallenged. Michael Sam showed a lot of heart today at pro day. Sam improved dramatically in the 40-yard dash, bench press, and vertical jump. However, the homophobia of these straight reporters is disgusting! (Audience, 2014bb).

Local coverage from the Post-Dispatch was more positive, its headline reading, “Michael Sam lets his workout do the talking” (Thomas, 2014f). The piece noted how Sam continued to restrict interactions with the media: “On the advice of his publicist, defensive end Michael Sam wasn’t talking Thursday. But plenty of others were talking about him following the University of Missouri pro day” (para. 1). The paper’s analysis continued, “Sam was significantly better in everything he did compared to the NFL Scouting Combine a month ago in Indianapolis” (para. 3). The outlet also backed up its arguments by citing Sam’s injury, “He did most of that work with an aching hamstring, which he apparently strained during his first 40-yard dash” (para. 6). Perceptions of Pro Day thus differed between ESPN and local coverage from the Post-Dispatch.
Queer media. While ESPN’s main column on Sam’s Pro Day argued Sam was showing that he was just “an ordinary athlete at best” (Chadiha, 2014a, para. 3), Outsports gave far more positive commentary. Outsports’ headline led with, “Michael Sam proves himself at Missouri’s Pro Day” (Zeigler, 2014g). The article continued, “All in all, a very good day for the NFL defensive end prospect” (para. 1). The outlet addressed Sam’s subpar combine performance by noting, “The other big message was that he clearly got the message from the Combine that he had to improve. He heard the message loud and clear, he put in the work, and he did in fact improve” (para. 3). It also emphasized how Sam’s performance improved despite the hamstring injury, suggesting this was an impressive accomplishment (para. 2).

Advocacy groups. In advance of Pro Day, Athlete Ally promoted the event on Twitter (Athlete, 2014p) and Facebook (Athlete, 2014q), calling for its fans to “stand behind him.” Following the event, the organization used Facebook to redistribute the Outsports analysis, advancing the good news of Sam’s stronger performance (Athlete, 2014r).

In summary: Pro Day and effects on Sam’s draft. Pro Day served as an example of how media attention to an event shaped Sam’s journey. While Sam’s performance at the combine – an event that creates hours of coverage for the network, generating millions in advertising revenue – obtained great coverage by ESPN, the outlet gave little attention to Sam’s Pro Day experience. This was in contrast to local media, queer media, and advocacy groups that shared Sam’s strong day, referencing many of the same league scouts who attended the combine. This is important to note because, as will be seen, much mainstream coverage reverted to using Sam’s sub-par combine performance as an indicative marker of his skill, mostly ignoring Pro Day.
With these athletic performances adding up, coverage began showing more diversity in predictions for when Sam would be drafted. In late April, the *ESPN 49ers* page called Sam “a late-round prospect” and noted the team was in need of Sam’s position (Williamson, 2014b, para. 5). A week before the draft, the *ESPN Seahawks* page said Sam could be in the running for its team: “Sam didn't test well at the combine and he's a bit undersized, but sometimes you have to go by what the man did on the field. You don't become the SEC Co-Defensive Player of the Year … on luck” (Blount, 2014, para. 13). This analysis served as an example of how the selection of facts was important in one’s assessment. The piece summarized that Sam “could be a steal for the Seahawks in the fifth or sixth round” (para. 13). Overall, mainstream assessments indicated a drop in Sam’s predicted draft status.

**If drafted, to which team would he go?**

Beyond questions of what round Sam would be drafted in, prognosticators wondered which team would pick him. While *ESPN* team pages were filled with their own analysis, they often also sourced local and queer media. Early in the spring, *ESPN* cited comments made by Cyd Zeigler (Cimini, 2014d). Calling him “[a] Sam acquaintance,” *ESPN* shared Zeigler’s thoughts that he “doesn't think the Jets would be a good landing spot for Sam” (para. 3). The outlet picked up Zeigler’s comments from an interview he did with a “CBS radio affiliate in Washington, D.C.” (para. 3), illustrating how queer media comments made their way to *ESPN*.

By mid-April, a report originating in the *Baltimore Sun* obtained national attention, both from mainstream and queer outlets. On April 15th, *The Sun* reported that six teams were particularly interested in Sam, including the paper’s hometown team, the Ravens (Wilson, 2014). Other outlets picked up the article the next day. *ESPN* analysis on its Ravens page thought the
team might pick Sam in the fifth or sixth round and further illustrated the debate between the importance of an event like the combine versus a player’s longer resume: “Sam didn't post an impressive 40-yard time (4.91 seconds) at the combine, but the Ravens weigh a player's motor on film over timed sprints” (Hensley, 2014, para. 7) The Sun’s report that the Jets might be interested in Sam caused that team’s ESPN page to state that Sam was still “projected as a middle-round pick” (Cimini, 2014e, para. 1).

Queer media also picked up the story as Outsports discussed the report on April 16th (Buzinski, 2014d). The positive story was further distributed by GLAAD, though it took the organization several days to share the story on its Facebook page (2014i) and Twitter feed (2014j). GLAAD’s Facebook post was then shared by the Florida LGBT publication, Hot Spots Magazine, a media outlet with over 22,000 Facebook followers of its own (GLAAD, 2014i).

Findings demonstrated how local stories about Sam were able to garner national attention, spreading through mainstream and queer media, as well as a chain of advocacy organizations. During this flowing process, queer voices – and pro-Sam arguments from NFL scouts – were spread.

Backlash

A significant amount of attention in the spring was paid to individuals who spoke in some negative fashion about LGBT athletes. This section will include events that involve story flow between mainstream and queer outlets; therefore, discussion of these outlets’ handling of a story will at times be combined.
Mainstream media. ESPN covered negative statements made by Giants cornerback Terrell Thomas (Graziano, 2014c). Illustrating how the story even became a story, Giants beat writer Dan Graziano wrote,

I spoke with Terrell Thomas on Tuesday night. We have been working on a project for later in the week about Michael Sam … and I reached out to Thomas because I know him to be a thoughtful guy who might have something interesting to say on the topic (2014d, para. 1).

To justify his comments, Thomas argued that the culture between the pros and college is different, stating that the NFL “is a brotherhood unlike no other” (Schwartz, 2014, para. 7). He further noted his feelings were based on his religion (para. 14). Outsports shared the piece, copying and pasting much of the ESPN report, then mocking Thomas’ arguments (Zeigler, 2014h). The outlet continued by noting, “the Giants owners have been great” on the topic of Sam (para. 7).

ESPN coverage of these stories often obtained comments from many individuals who defended these anti-gay athletes and coaches. For example, an ESPN audience member made the following comments about Thomas:

All you sissies that are butt hurt about what Terrell Thomas said need to relax! The bottom line is, that people coming out of the closet is jus now over the past few years is being accepted by most society, not all. Back 10 years ago when I was still in school, if you were gay, you had best kept that to yourself or there would be problems. Not by jus me but "society"!! The fact that "society" has started to accept it does not mean everyone else does or will. I am 100% against gays. Do I hate gays, no, not all. To each his own, but go about your bussiness and keep that to yourselves. No need to bring the extra (negative) attention to the rest of your future teammates. You really think they want to be answering questions every week about what it's like to play with a gay player? Doubt it. It's actually pretty embarrassing, cause they'll have to watch they're every word, which is b.s.. There's already plenty distractions that go on during the course of a nfl season, to have to deal with the "elephant in the room" of answering bout your gay teammate. If you say 1 thing negative, the media will paint it as friction in the locker room. If they say nothing bad, then they'll get the public perception of those that are against it. Again, if your gay, keep that to yourself!! (Audience, 2014cc).

Yet, ESPN also often received audience comments criticizing such homophobia: “Didn't Jackie Robinson not face the same kind of BS when he entered White Mans baseball?” (Audience, 2014dd).
The ability for one anti-Sam comment made on social media by an athlete to garner national attention was seen a few weeks later when golfer Steve Elkington took to Twitter (Harig, 2014). Elkington wrote to his almost 60,000 followers, "ESPN covering Michael Sam as a gay athlete is embarrassing ....." (Harig, 2014, para. 4). He then relatedly tweeted, “ESPN reporting Michael Sam is leading the handbag throw at NFL combine.... No one else expected to throw today” (Harig, 2014, para. 3) The comments obtained coverage in Outsports (Buzinski, 2014), which cited the tweets via a Deadspin article that screen-captured them and added the title, “Old Asshole Golfer Has Thought About Michael Sam” (Ley, 2014a)

ESPNW’s Kate Fagan used the Elkington incident – combined with other audience criticism – to address why the Sam story was important. In her piece – “Why Covering Gay Athletes Is News” – Fagan wrote:

Elkington is part of a persistent chorus of people whose new favorite refrain goes something like this: ‘Who cares? Why is this news?’...The handbag "joke" is how homophobia in sports used to work. People would say something blatantly stereotypical or unaccepting - "No homos here" -- making their position crystal-clear, a line drawn in the sand. It was homophobia dressed in a neon outfit: hard to miss. .... Now, the language is coded, dipped in a layer of deniability, so that actually having a meaningful debate becomes harder, because nobody seems to be saying what they really mean. .... So many people are asking these questions, and with varying intentions, that it is sometimes hard to distinguish between the folks who might genuinely want an answer and those who are making a rhetorical statement in place of actually saying, ‘I liked it better when athletes lived in the closet.’...Straight athletes ‘broadcast’ their heterosexuality every day, in ways large and small: holding hands with their girlfriends and boyfriends in public, talking about their wives and husbands with teammates, thanking their loved ones in front of TV cameras, walking the red carpet arm-in-arm with their dates. ... So it's actually a good thing that Steve Elkington has a Twitter account and uses it so freely. Because the conversation is just getting started (2014, para. 5-20).

ESPNW Vice President Laura Gentile personally posted in the audience comments section of Fagan’s piece: “Another response gaining in popularity is: ‘It doesn't matter I just want to win.’ It effectively short circuits the discussion” (Audience, 2014ee). Thus, ESPNW continued to counter-frame much of the coverage seen in its more widely read ESPN pages.

Queer media and advocacy organizations. An example of the complexity of story flow was seen in the February Queerty piece – “Here’s just one example of how hard it will be for Michael Sam in the NFL” (Gallagher, 2014b). The post linked to an article on
TalkingPointsMemo (Kludt, 2014). The TPM piece linked to a video on Deadspin that captured an interview former head coach Herm Edwards gave to ESPN (Burke, 2014a). The chain of articles highlighted Edwards’s comments that Sam was “bringing baggage” to a team (Burke, 2014a, para. 2). To shape their piece, Deadspin posted tweets from audience members, all blasting Edwards (Burke, 2014a). Queerty claimed Edwards’s comments complemented those said by “more PR-savvy NFL figures” (Gallagher, 2014b, para. 6), again referring back to the anonymously sourced Peter King and Sports Illustrated articles. The queer outlet highlighted one of those anonymous quotes, which stated, “To call somebody a [gay slur] is still so commonplace” (Gallagher, 2014b, para. 7). Queerty thus concluded, “Note that SI took it upon itself to delete the slur in question. …That someone would think it’s okay to use it in a conversation with media just shows what an uphill Sam is facing” (Gallagher, 2014b, para. 8).

The Edwards comment led to a litany of interacting outlets, types of media platforms, and intermingling topics of discussion within the broader Sam story.

Mainstream political stories also developed into coverage within queer and liberal outlets. Queer outlets focused on a report that a “GOP lobbyist (was) drafting (a) bill to ban Michael Sam and gay players from the NFL” (Zeigler, 2014i). The Outsports piece received over 500 retweets and over 6,000 shares, using a report from the political outlet The Hill as its source (Zeigler, 2014i). The next day, Athlete Ally retweeted a Michael Sam post that said the lobbyist “is going to need a Delorian, not some bogus bill, if he wants to prevent gay athletes from being in the locker room” (Athlete, 2014s). The organization then used the event as an opportunity to write a piece on its blog as an “illustration of the ignorance and bigotry that still exist” in society (Athlete, 2014t, para. 2). Queerty also addressed the story by sharing the Michael Sam Delorian
(sic) tweet (Gallagher, 2014c), a practice *The Huffington Post* also used on the story as that outlet shared a tweet from the lobbyist’s gay brother as a key source (Stein, 2014).

**In summary: Backlash.** News media and advocacy organizations gave much attention to anti-queer comments made by other athletes or professionals. Statements made by even tangential athletes received coverage from a broad spectrum of sources. In some cases, social media itself was the cause of the story while the audience-based platforms served as discussion drivers in other instances. Many of these stories demonstrated how story flow could not only ripple between mainstream and queer outlets, but also between topics and frames within Sam’s broader story. This occurred as outlets engaged with other dimensions of Sam’s tale when responding to these instances of anti-queer comments.

**Queer media and advocacy specific frames**

Queer media outlets and advocacy organizations addressed many other aspects of Sam’s journey. The next two sections will discuss queer media and advocacy support for Sam, followed by queer media gossip.

**Supporting Sam.** Queer outlets often promoted stories that were supportive of Sam. Sometimes, these outlets built upon supportive comments made in mainstream outlets. For example, an interview with leading NFL quarterbacks Colin Kaepernick and Cam Newton on *ESPN*’s television program, *Sunday Conversation*, was widely disseminated across queer outlets. On February 17th, *Outsports* shared the story (Buzinski, 2014f). On the 18th, it was shared on Athlete Ally’s Facebook page (Athlete, 2014u) and Twitter feed (Athlete, 2014v), as well as in a piece on *Queerty* (Tharrett, 2014a). Illustrating the different tones that audience comments posted on different queer outlets can take, the sports-centric *Outsports* obtained little audience
response, whereas Queerty’s audience discussion largely focused on implications that the two quarterbacks were possibly gay themselves or that they would make a “cute couple” (Audience, 2014ff).

At other times, queer media promoted positive stories from other queer outlets. This included Outsports’ promotion of Out Magazine’s annual Power 50 list, which “included two professional athletes for the first time ever” (Zeigler, 2014j, para. 1). The coverage noted the historic nature of the year for gays in sport:

The naming of these two athletes is another signal of a culture shift in the LGBT community. … It signals that the community is finally recognizing the power of sports in our movement and the ability of LGBT professional athletes to have not just cultural impact but also business success (Zeigler, 2014j, para. 4).

Queer organizations and news outlets also cited the work of fellow advocacy leaders and groups. On its social media platforms (Athlete, 2014w; Athlete, 2014x), Athlete Ally promoted an article from Bleacher Report titled, “How Wade Davis and Others Paved the Way for Michael Sam.” The piece prominently featured Ally member Akil Patterson, as well as Cyd Zeigler (Freeman, 2014a). It was read over 126,000 times (Freeman, 2014a) Meanwhile, Outsports distributed information about Michael Sam being in a You Can Play Project advocacy video (Zeigler, 2014k). Illustrating the complicated dynamics of story flow across queer-supportive media channels, one example involved an Outsports audience member asking a Minnesota Vikings player during a Twitter Q&A whether he would “welcome a gay player” on his team (Buzinski, 2014g). The Twitter exchange, which included a response from the player saying that he would, then became the focus of an Outsports article (Buzinski, 2014g). The piece used additional quotes from the reader as part of its story. Athlete Ally then distributed the story through its Facebook page (Athlete, 2014y) and Twitter feed (Athlete, 2014z).

Some social media interactions facilitated direct partnerships between queer groups and media outlets. Using a press release, GLAAD announced a partnership with the You Can Play
Project (GLAAD, 2014k). GLAAD had united with You Can Play’s Wade Davis upon Sam’s coming out announcement. In the release, Davis was quoted citing GLAAD’s media relations role and strength within the movement: “With GLAAD’s almost 30 years of experience educating the media, this partnership will help ensure that LGBT athletes and coaches will be represented in the media with great respect and dignity” (para. 5).

Queer advocacy organizations also focused on intra-movement support, commonly sharing positive sentiments that were shared publicly about Sam. For example, GLAAD cited news coverage that used individuals such as former basketball star and current commentator Charles Barkley, who stated,

I think it’s an insult to gay people to think that they are going to be looking at their teammates in a sexual way. That’s an insult to all gay men. And we welcome them to the locker room, and I wish Mr. Sam the best” (Dera, 2014a).

GLAAD would then often share such positive sentiments about Sam made by unaffiliated individuals on its organizational social media pages (GLAAD, 2014l).

Queer outlets further distributed many pro-Sam comments developed in other sources, both mainstream and queer. The ability for many platforms to be interacting at once – such as audience comments made in an athlete’s Twitter Q&A that obtained queer media coverage that led to advocacy social media distribution – showed that a number of individuals were able to drive coverage. The lack of homogeneity among audiences of queer outlets also became apparent.

Queer Gossip. Unlike discussions about athletic skill or societal importance, Queerty often covered the Sam story from a different angle: that of a gossip column. While not a traditional news source studied in agenda-setting research, tabloid-style reports and headlines were clearly on audience minds throughout the year. For example, Queerty picked up a story from pop culture website Pop Wrapped that reportedly showed exclusive photos of Michael Sam
“sending nudes through grindr,” a gay dating application (Tharrett, 2014b). In mid-February, Queerty also shared a story link with video from TMZ in which Sam, shirtless, danced in a gay bar (Queerty, 2014b). While the video was clearly obtained by TMZ in response to Sam’s public announcement, it was actually captured in October (Queerty, 2014b). Yet, with a non-time specific headline, coupled with the timing of the release, the video was assumed by many audience members to be recent, and some of them thought it was inappropriate for Sam to behave this way following his coming out (Queerty, 2014b; TMZ, 2014a). The incident highlighted the importance of salacious headlines that were able to drive audience sentiment toward Sam.

Queerty also posted a story focusing on who Sam’s boyfriend might be. “Is this openly gay NFL hopeful Michael Sam’s boyfriend?” asked a headline (Smith, R., 2014a). As Queerty noted that the gay community had “only had a few days to drool over hunky, newly out” Sam, it linked to a report on sensational gossip column Media Take Out (para. 1). Instead of merely covering who Sam’s boyfriend may have been, MTO focused on race and sex, its headline reading, “We’ve ALL HEARD THE NEWS of the Gay NFL Player Coming Out…Now Meet the WHITE DUDE…He’s Been QUARTERBACK SACKING For the Past Few Months!!” (Media, 2014) Despite Queerty’s own attention-grabbing headline and link to Media Take Out, the outlet noted its audience should “take this news with a grain of salt” because of the perceived lack of credibility of MTO (para. 4). Still, Queerty itself stoked gossip rumors, concluding, “Perhaps they could double date with 49-er Colin Kaepernick and his rumored boo” (para. 5). There was audience pushback against Queerty for publishing links to MTO, some saying the outlet was reaching for “the bottom of the barrel” (Audience, 2014gg). Yet, the supplied images of Sam with a white boyfriend caused other commenters to note race, including sarcastic remarks.
such as, “raise your hand if you’re shocked the boyfriend is white!” (Audience, 2014hh). Months later, it turned out the images were not of Sam’s present boyfriend.

*Queerty* stories linking to gossip outlets pointed to a complicated relationship between the outlets and their audiences as audiences both craved and disparaged salacious entertainment-based content. Outlets like *TMZ* started to show a very real power to drive audience attention, shaping views of Sam with dated videos of him dancing in a gay bar. The power of *TMZ* headlines and their use of shareable videos were also demonstrated. Finally, private media content – such as material from a gay dating app – was able to flow into mainstream and queer gossip coverage.

**Sexuality and race**

Discussions of Sam’s boyfriend were illustrative of a broader commentary relating to the intersection of sexuality and race. Queer outlets and advocacy organizations used Sam’s story as a catalyst to address broader societal questions. For example, GLAAD posted on its website a discussion about how Michael Sam and Jason Collins “recast (the) view of black manhood” (Kane, 2014). The GLAAD post shared a story from *Good Morning America*, the latter outlet having discussed the topic with a writer from the gay black news outlet, *Elixher Magazine* (Kane, 2014). Similarly noting how “(b)oth the Black community and sports community have been labeled as hostile places for LGBTQ individuals to exist,” GLAAD used the quote, which Wade Davis made in an op-ed in *Ebony*, to showcase how Sam and Collins were “mythbusters” (Murray, 2014b, para. 3). The story flow thus involved a niche gay news voice that was promoted on a mainstream news outlet and then shared by queer advocacy groups.
*Queerty* similarly featured its own column on how Collins and Sam offered a “New era of role models for black gay men” (Smith, R., 2014b). The piece noted, “Black gay men are having a moment, and it’s about damn time” (para. 1). The columnist argued that these athletes had the “opportunity to change the way Americans see black gay men, and how black gay men see themselves” (para. 3). The piece noted how these masculine figures were able to break down stereotypes:

> It has sometimes seemed like Black gay men existed on some other plane away from the rest of the gay community. We were either completely ignored, hyper-sexualized or accepted only when we slapped on a wig and some makeup and lip-synched to dance music. The images of us were just not as varied as our white male counterparts. … When men like these come barreling out of the closet in traditionally “masculine” fields, they challenge the mainstream idea of what “gay” is in a way that very few men have before them. For black gays in particular, they become instant role models for a generation of young black gay men who struggle to find images in mainstream gay America that they can connect to (para. 5-8).

The topic of race was also addressed by *Outsports*, which noted how “African American gay men lead the way in sports” (Pryor, 2014).

As comments from league officials stated that a player’s sexuality did not matter, *Queerty* noted how, while these comments were supportive in nature, “on the other hand, this ‘nobody cares’ attitude may swing the pendulum a little too far in the other direction. It erases the Michael Sam’s queerness…” (Baume, 2014, para. 7). Finally, discussions of Sam’s impact on gays and sport from a lesbian perspective were almost non-existent. In one *New York Times* article that focused on the WNBA’s first ever pride event, one commenter even asked, “How come the only WNBA coverage from the Times in weeks – months? – is about sexuality?” (Audience, 2014ii).

Michael Sam’s masculinity and race fueled conversations within queer outlets and among advocacy groups, although such discussions were rarely found in mainstream media. Sam’s characteristics were argued to have given voice and awareness to black gay men in particular while the NFL’s focus on skill was claimed to have minimized his queerness.
Audience feedback

This chapter ends by examining the importance of audience feedback in the conversation flow related to Michael Sam’s story. Special emphasis is given to audience interactivity and criticism of media actions, in addition to news coverage based on audience response.

The interactive audience. Audience interactivity took many forms. Directly inviting audience feedback, many ESPN pages discussed Sam through the use of what the outlet called Twitter Mailbags (Archer, 2014a; Teicher, 2014). In these instances, beat writers responded to audience questions about Sam obtained through audience tweets. At the local level, the traditional model of “Letters to the Editor” continued and some readers discussed how, in their view, the Post-Dispatch “goes beyond reporting news, (and) advocates for homosexuality” (O’Shaughnessy, 2014).

Audience criticism of media coverage. While it has so far been established that many comments on ESPN suggested that readers had grown tired of coverage of Sam’s story, some commenters had other criticisms of the media. The most common of these was the notion that the media themselves might be to blame if Sam’s journey were to take a turn for the worse. “I just hope the media doesn't screw this up for him,” one reader remarked (Audience, 2014jj). “U know the Media is gonna poke at this everyday until someone says a small comment not meaning anything by it and all of a sudden ESPN will blow it up,” another stated (Audience, 2014kk). Finally, other commenters became critical of the media’s discussion of whether Sam would become a media distraction to a team, such as the following posted on an ESPN Jets page article written by Rich Cimini:

You and other journalists talk about the media circus as though you have nothing to do with it. You, Cimini, are *part* of that circus. The point is, then, that your actions are going to affect Sam’s draft status;
that teams will lower his draft grade because of decisions *you* make. Are you really okay with that? (Audience, 2014ll).

**News coverage of audience response.** Audience feedback was able to generate its own news coverage. For example, multiple stories cited an academic study about Twitter out of Emory University (Williamson, 2014c; Zeigler, C., 2014l). The study showed which cities with NFL teams had the most positive and negative audience feedback relating to Michael Sam on the social media platform (Zeigler, C., 2014l). Both the *ESPN* 49ers beat (Williamson, 2014c) and *Outsports* (Zeigler, C. 2014l) used the audience-based data as the basis for their stories.

Other stories discussed Sam’s popularity with audiences. *ESPN* business writer Darren Rovell wrote many of these stories, such as an article noting, “More than 300 people showed up to the first public autograph signing by former Missouri defensive end Michael Sam…” (2014b, para. 1). It was reported that Sam’s trading card sales more than doubled the card sell rates of his athletic peers (Rovell, 2014b, para. 3). Yet, many *ESPN* audience members did not understand why Sam obtained such a following:

> The reason so many were at his signing was because of his sexual orientation. Not because he's a potential top draft choice. He's projected to be a mid-round draft pick and when has a mid-round pick garnered this much attention? (Audience, 2014mm).

A fellow commenter shared a similar sentiment, disturbed by the popularity of a gay individual:

> Sad that hundreds of people show up just because this guy is gay. He may not even be good in the NFL. This has Tim Tebow written all over it. At least Tebow was a good Christian. This guy is glorified because he is a homosexual. That's very sad (Audience, 2014nn).

Audiences themselves became the basis for some stories. By showing their support for Sam, his large base of fans was able to generate positive stories about the athlete. This fan support miffed many other audience commenters, showing the diversity of audience response between those on news outlets such as *ESPN* and those expressing support on other outlets and through consumer sales.
Chapter VI conclusion

While Chapter Five demonstrated how a single event – Sam’s coming out – had a unifying effect, this chapter showed how conversations dramatically diverged when there were few singular events. Coverage that emphasized certain events but not others – such as a focus on either Sam’s combine performance or his Pro Day but not both – demonstrated how media professionals’ selection of particular pieces of information greatly shaped perceptions of Sam’s skill. The media-centric NFL combine was able to drive coverage about Sam’s abilities, indicating dynamics of power and the influence of news processes as an outlet like ESPN uses the event as a major advertising revenue generator.

Once again, these examples illustrated how many different players – including audiences – across many different platforms have a role in shaping how aspects of the larger story flowed through media channels. The flow of these interactions was less a unidirectional flow and more of an intermingling ripple. Queer outlets began to develop and deploy a unique voice on many topics that received less attention in mainstream media. Finally, the inclusion of gossip commentary showed how even arguably non-credible but popular information sources could build and shape discussion of Sam.
CHAPTER VII: The draft; the kiss

This chapter will explore a period of Sam’s journey during May 2014. This time period included the NFL Draft and a significant focus on a very public kiss Sam made on live television. Because of the unknown nature of Sam’s draft date, coupled with the significant pre-promotion of the event by queer media and advocacy groups, the days leading up to the draft will also be included in this chapter.

The draft

Every year, one of the most watched events in the National Football League is the NFL draft. A three-day extravaganza, the draft is filled with cameras, players, sponsors, agents, and media personnel as collegiate athletes are drafted into the big leagues. Comparable to Sam’s coming out story, the draft obtained a significant amount of media and advocacy attention. This section will follow the model of Chapter Five by breaking down the findings into three timelines to capture the results from mainstream media, queer media, and queer advocacy groups. Audience interactions will be interwoven where appropriate.

Mainstream media

Leading up to Sam’s selection. As the draft began, outlets offered their final analysis of what the draft meant for Sam – and what Sam meant for the draft. On the first day of the draft, a New York Times column focused on problems the league might face if Sam were picked late (Pennington, 2014). The article included forecasts by some that Sam might not be selected at all:
“And should Sam be spurned — a possibility, draft analysts said — the N.F.L. could be backpedaling as it tries to explain how a college all-American could be unwanted after 256 draft picks” (para. 3) The article cited an NFL Network analyst who, after speaking with every team, concluded Sam would be selected in “the last two or three rounds” (para. 22). The Times analysis focused on the combine performance as justification, “When he underperformed at the biggest of those auditions, the N.F.L. combine in late February, he plummeted to the back of the player rankings” (para. 7). The piece noted Sam’s improvements at Pro Day but argued the performance was not enough to move Sam back up in the rankings (para. 7). The analysis returned to the skill level versus distraction argument by stating:

Because Sam is considered at best a mid- to late-round pick, and because those players are often not starters, some teams may decide that the news media firestorm of having the league’s first openly gay player is not worth the distraction (para. 10).

Many of the spring frames thus came full circle, united into a NYT piece that based its arguments on statements from a sports media analyst.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch addressed similar arguments about Sam’s status but also focused on the expected media coverage that would surround the pick (Caesar, 2014a). The paper interviewed the head of ESPN’s draft coverage, Seth Markman. “[A]s far as I can remember this will be the most interest in a Day-Three player,” Markman told the outlet (para. 4). Markman described how mainstream outlets would shape the event coverage:

What will happen on Saturday is that ourselves and the NFL Network will give a list of players to the league that we would be interested in having actually announced, so we can cover it for television and then talk about it. There are usually a few players that we want to make sure get announced for the TV audience because there’s so much interest, and (Sam) obviously is a no-brainer. … Say Michael Sam is selected, someone from the NFL will contact us and say, ‘Heads up for TV, this pick is Michael Sam’…We will go, ‘Whoa, hold on!’ We’ll stop what we are doing and make sure we’re in position to get the announcement and talk about it (para. 6-10).

The quote highlights how the relationship between ESPN and the league was fundamental in how the outlet could build and shape a live event based on pre-existing knowledge. Markman also
said the network would discuss specific frames upon Sam’s selection: “…there also is the added discussion point of the locker room and the maturity of the team, the organization as a whole as to how they’re going to handle it” (para. 16).

A day or two prior to Sam’s selection, ESPN and the NFL Network reported to the Post-Dispatch that they had been denied permission to place a camera on Sam during the draft (Caesar, 2014a). “We haven’t given up on that, but I don’t think we’ll have a live shot of him during the draft,” Markman had told the Post-Dispatch (para. 25). Yet, entrance was secured in a manner demonstrating how relationships, trust, and media power could create access:

Markman said there had been a lot of behind-the-scenes negotiations for that access. [ESPN Producer Maura] Mandt had embedded with the Sam camp on Friday and Saturday as part of the feature leading up to the Arthur Ashe Award, which he will receive at the ESPYs on July 16. ‘He was comfortable with that group,’ Markman says. ‘Maura helped ease their camp’s mind that they could trust me, because they didn’t know me at all.’ (Deitsch, 2014, para. 7-8).

As the draft rounds came and went, Sam was not the only person waiting – news coverage commented on how Sam was still on the board. ESPN’s main draft page continued using the poor combine performance as justification, noting Sam “has seen his draft stock drop following a disappointing showing at the scouting combine” (ESPN.com News, 2014g, para. 2).

The waiting ended on Saturday, May 10th. Artis Twyman, the Senior Director of Communications for the St. Louis Rams, got a call “around six, or a little bit before” from coach Jeff Fisher to give Twyman a “heads up” that the team might pick Sam in the final round if he was still available (personal communication, March 6, 2015). Twyman noted the heads up was important from a strategic perspective because the team “understood the magnitude of what it would take, [Coach Fisher] kinda wanted me to kinda be thinking about a PR plan, and uh, how to handle that…” (personal communication, March 6, 2015). And so, the St. Louis Rams selected Michael Sam in the seventh round of the draft, pick 249 out of a possible 256 (Clayton, 2014c).
The Rams’ public relations actions demonstrated how the organization’s preparations helped shape the resulting coverage.

**A historic pick, but Sam not an advocate.** ESPN’s NFL draft page claimed Sam’s selection was groundbreaking: “Seeing Michael Sam cry after hearing the news that he was selected in the seventh round by the St. Louis Rams was perhaps the greatest scene in NFL draft history” (Clayton, 2014c, para. 4). Many audience members were not supportive of the claim, “Michael Sam being drafted...in the seventh round!...the greatest scene in NFL draft history? Really?” (Audience, 2014oo). Another audience commenter responded to the coverage written by ESPN’s John Clayton by saying,

> I think you seriously erred in making Michael Sam the starting point of your piece. … While it perhaps deserved a place in your column, making it front and center (and calling it ‘perhaps the greatest moment in NFL draft history’) was uncalled for, and entirely irrelevant to the topics at hand (Audience, 2014pp).

In its post-selection coverage, the *Post-Dispatch* called Sam’s selection a “Historic Pick” in its headline (Matter, 2014d). The piece included an interview with Outsports’ Cyd Zeigler and noted the friend-based relationship between Zeigler and Howard Bragman: “When the Rams selected the Mizzou defensive end … the two jumped up, started hugging and crying ...” (para. 5). To emphasize how Sam could be an important cultural figure without being actively involved with advocacy groups, Zeigler was quoted as saying:

> Every professional athlete’s advocacy is simply playing his sport … Michael does not need to show up in pride parades or make statements on public issues. Simply him coming out and being drafted and showing up in the locker room and playing in the preseason, all of this is his advocacy. And that’s all we want him to do. I don't want him to be an quote-un-quote activist. I just want him to be a football player (para. 22-23).

Two days later, a Bryan Burwell *Post-Dispatch* column again showed the local outlet’s frequent sourcing of Outsports (2014b). The column, which called Zeigler “a close Sam adviser,” quoted him to address the impact media attention had on Sam while also reiterating Sam’s focus on football: “At the combine, there wasn’t a moment that went by when he wasn’t
thinking about all of this. But by the time the season rolls around, all of this stuff will be gone. He’ll be focused completely on football” (para. 23).

In total, mainstream coverage used two frames defending why Sam would be picked low: a weak combine performance and Sam as a distraction. Yet, media outlets admitted they had thorough plans in place to promote Sam’s draft moment, including pre-set frames they would use to shape the story, such as addressing locker room comfort. ESPN used trust and power of positioning to get access to Sam, and used its relationship with the NFL to have advance warning. Thus, ESPN had a strong plan in place to shape Sam’s moment. The Rams additionally demonstrated how their organization was also prepared to facilitate a narrative. Findings showed how a sourcing relationship between Zeigler and a local outlet gave a stronger queer voice to mainstream coverage of Sam. Coverage emphasized how Sam, though a historic pick, would not be an LGBT activist, at least not as an athlete involved with queer organizations.

**Initial framing of the draft selection.** As mainstream outlets analyzed Sam’s draft, frames focused on his draft value, his status as a distraction, and league homophobia.

Coverage focused on whether Sam was a good value as a seventh-round pick, coupled with debates about whether his low draft status was an indication of league homophobia – an issue debated throughout the spring. Discussion continued about how arguments of distraction may have played a role.

On the issue of value, the ESPN Cowboys page used that program’s owner, Jerry Jones, to note how he “expressed surprise Sam was still available in the seventh round” (Watkins, 2014a, para. 5). The ESPN Rams beat concluded that Sam was the team’s best draft move (Wagoner, 2014a). The Post-Dispatch likewise gave the selection of Sam an “A” rating, commenting, “How often do you see SEC defensive player of the year this late?” (Thomas,
2014g). Much of the coverage thus concluded that Sam was a steal of a pick in the seventh round.

While some mainstream analysts had debated whether Sam would be picked at all prior to the draft, many were suddenly asking why Sam was drafted so late. The *ESPN* Jets page countered the media and league’s use of the 40-yard dash metric against Sam by noting how the Jets’ sixth-round defensive pick was “slower than Sam, based on their reported 40-yard dash times, [and] his level of competition in college doesn't match that of Sam -- Louisiana Tech and Missouri, respectively” (Cimini, 2014f, para. 10). *ESPN*’s Jeffri Chadiha, the same voice who had focused on Sam’s combine mediocrity even after his Pro Day performance, changed his framing, now commenting, “It was difficult to find anybody at Mizzou's pro day who didn't rave about his resilient nature, which is what separates remarkable special-teamers from ordinary ones” (2014b, para. 9). Further in contrast to his earlier statements that Sam was just an ordinary athlete, Chadiha now said, “Sam has too much talent to just write this off as a public relations move” (para. 12).

Debates developed about what Sam’s low pick indicated about potential league homophobia. *ESPN*’s Panthers page used statistics to note Sam’s placement did not make mathematical sense (Newton, 2014b). Stating that many teams rated Sam a “fifth or sixth round(er)” (para. 3), the page noted, “Statistically, it doesn't add up. Sam, the first openly gay player selected in the draft, led the SEC in sacks (10.5) and tackles for loss (18) compared to 9.5 and 14.5 for (Kony) Ealy” (para. 4). Kony Ealy was Sam’s Mizzou teammate; Ealy was drafted in second round, based on what *ESPN* called his “versatility” (Newton, 2014b).
Bridging the homophobia argument with the distraction debate, the *Post-Dispatch’s*

Bernie Miklasz cried foul over Sam’s draft status and argued against those who were claiming Sam would be a harmful distraction:

It should be no surprise, then, to see Fisher and his Rams step forward when none of the other 31 NFL teams had the guts to choose Mizzou pass rusher Michael Sam. … Here’s the only fact – the only test – that matters: after 248 selections, no franchise had bothered to open the door to an All-American defensive end, the co-SEC defensive Player of the Year and a pass-rush force that helped make No. 5 Missouri one of the best defenses in the nation last year. On the final day of the ’14 draft, in rounds four through seven, 10 defensive ends came off the board as Sam waited for a phone call…Some of the defensive ends were pulled from small, even obscure, college programs such as Illinois State, Marist and Concordia-St. Paul. Sam — despite his award-winning season in the best college football conference in the land — was still on the board, ignored. And we were supposed to believe this had nothing to do with Sam being the first openly gay player eligible for an NFL draft? That's absurdly naïve. … How many times do you have a chance to grab the SEC Defensive Player of the Year with a supplemental seventh-round pick? … And this concocted issue of “distractions” is just that: nonsense. There will be an initial media stampede, yes. But I'd expect the Rams to have a firm but reasonable plan for media access to Sam. And after the first round of stories, the national media will move on, and everyone at Rams Park will continue working (2014b, para. 3-26).

*ESPN* also addressed the distraction frame. The outlet wrote: “Even if it wasn't obvious, you can bet some general managers thought long and hard about what kind of distractions might come with Sam's arrival” (Chadiha, 2014b, para. 4). The Rams beat thought the realities of St. Louis would minimize Sam being a distraction: “On a macro level, St. Louis provides a smaller media market through which Sam should be able to go about his business without much distraction” (Wagoner, 2014b, para. 5). While the distraction frame was prominent, *ESPN*’s Cowboys beat used owner Jerry Jones to counter the frame: “Jones said NFL teams shouldn't have any problems having Sam as a player because he was gay…” (Watkins, 2014a, para. 5).

**The role of sourcing.** Post-draft coverage continued to show which sources were most utilized by mainstream press to frame Sam’s journey. For example, the *ESPN* Rams page illustrated how players and league officials were asked to discuss the draft (Wagoner, 2014c). The beat noted that the Rams’ general manager, coach, and players had multiple interviews on *ESPN Radio* and local radio outlets (Wagoner, 2014c).
The *ESPN* Rams page also linked to news coverage, such as analysis in *Grantland* (Wagoner, 2014c). After calling Sam’s emotional scene upon being drafted “the most important and meaningful minute in the history of draft coverage on television…” (Barnwell, 2014, para. 2), *Grantland* described how Twitter and texting were used by the journalist to gauge sentiment:

Before Sam came off the board, the writers and analysts who make up the broader NFL community on Twitter were becoming more and more furious. I got texts from friends who barely care about football, seriously concerned that Sam was going to go undrafted. A narrative was emerging: The league was avoiding Sam because of his sexuality (para. 8).

Post-draft coverage also continued to demonstrate how sourcing of non-sports individuals shaped mainstream coverage. For example, the *ESPN* Rams page cited a White House statement in which President Obama congratulated Sam and the Rams (Wagoner, 2014d). The same article noted, “Ellen DeGeneres was among a number of celebrities to take to Twitter to offer congratulations…” (para. 5). The *Post-Dispatch* used the event as an opportunity to ask celebrities such as actor Jon Hamm, a Missouri native, his thoughts: “I’m very happy that he landed with the Rams. I cannot believe that a guy with that much talent and that much upside fell that far in the draft, and I think we all know why” (Goold, 2014, para. 5). League officials, players, other media analysis, and prominent non-sports figures thus influenced mainstream coverage.

**Press conferences, media obsession and the coming summer coverage.** Following the draft, the Rams organization held a press conference to highlight all of its new players. The event proved to have as much media attention as Sam’s combine press conference – once again demonstrating how media-specific events built their own hype. The Rams’ formatting of the press conference structured how media covered the organization that day. Rams communications director Artis Twyman said, “by far this was the biggest event” the team had experienced from a media perspective (personal communication, March 6, 2015). Twyman noted how the team
wanted to make sure the event did not turn into “the Michael Sam show” (personal communication, March 6, 2015). From a strategic perspective, Twyman broke up the presser into three tiers, based on the day a player was drafted. As Sam was drafted on the last day, he was in the last wave of players to speak. Before Sam’s session began, Twyman told the journalists in the room, “Hey, listen you guys, I know everyone has questions for Michael Sam; this session is for football questions. If you have football questions, even if they’re for Michael Sam, let this be football questions…” (personal communication, March 6, 2015). Twyman hoped this format would allow all players to get questions. He announced that, afterwards, journalists would have a session just with “Michael, just because again, we understood the magnitude of it, of what is going on, and so that was great, so everybody had to ask questions of everybody who was drafted four to seven (rounds)...” (personal communication, March 6, 2015).

Thus, Sam’s words at a press conference were once again able to shape coverage. In its headline, the Post-Dispatch adopted Sam’s voice: “Sam ‘determined to be great’” (Strauss, J., 2014b). Local journalists noted how much media attention the presser obtained. The Post-Dispatch’s Joe Strauss said a media room usually occupied by a handful of familiar press types bustled with well-dressed humanity from the NFL Network, ESPN, FoxSports1, CNN and NBC. Every local TV station dispatched a full crew. The Oprah Network sent a team to produce a documentary (2014b, para. 17).

The paper also noted how outlets like ESPN would cover Michael Sam over the summer: “[I]f the turnout Tuesday at Rams Park for his introductory news conference is any indication, Sam is one of two leading candidates to be the designated ‘Story of the Summer’ guy in the national sports media” (Caesar, 2014b, para. 5). The Post-Dispatch quoted ESPN’s Seth Markman, who cited the audience as being a justification in the decision to cover Sam so frequently: “I think it’s a story line the American public is going to want to follow, and we owe it to them to follow that story line. … He’s a significant human interest story that touches more than NFL fans” (Caesar,
Markman thus noted how audience interest shaped coverage: “A much higher percentage of the general population is intrigued by the story and wants to see how he does” (para. 11). Finally, ESPN quoted Sam’s agent, who spoke to Sam’s broad support: “Michael's inclusion in the NFL is bringing fans into the game who weren't previously consumers of the NFL game” (Rovell, 2014c, para. 7).

**Mainstream Audiences.** Mainstream audiences were mixed in their response to Sam’s drafting. Some ESPN Rams page audiences familiar with Sam’s college play found it hard to believe Sam had fallen so far: “It only took 249 picks until someone finally made a football decision and drafted the SEC defensive player of the year. First or second round talent in the 7th round is unbelievable” (Audience, 2014qq).

Meanwhile, many ESPN audience posts continued to criticize the network’s coverage: “If being gay don't matter then why and how do ESPN give this much press to a 7th rounder. I'm losing respect for ESPN,” one poster said (Audience, 2014rr). An audience argument that media were out of touch was also apparent at the local level, as seen by this comment from the Post-Dispatch: “The agenda driven sports writers may finally realize that this story of a Gay ball player does not resonate with the MAJORITY of the fans in this town or the entire country, for sure?? Give it a f****** rest” (Audience, 2014ss). Some letters to the editor had a similar theme: “Media, activists show no tolerance for dissent on homosexuality” (Ragsdale, 2014). These audiences thus pushed back against what was perceived to be a media-created agenda.

While many audiences shared their displeasure with the story, other metrics demonstrated continued audience interest in Sam. ESPN showed how social media audiences could be used as a gauge of Sam’s success: “Sam … saw his followers on Twitter grow by more than 20 percent to 115,500 within two hours of being picked” (Wagoner, 2014e, para. 30). The outlet also
highlighted how Sam’s jersey sales – which placed second among all rookies despite his low-draft status – were an indicator of Sam’s audience reach (Rovell, 2014c). Finally, The New York Times’ reports on which stories were the most widely read indicated that audiences were still interested in Sam’s journey as the Times article announcing Sam’s being drafted was the third most read article in the sports section that week (Top, 2014b).

**In summary: Frames, sources that influenced those frames and audience response.**
The selection of sources again greatly shaped story framing. Journalists not only reacted to news coverage from other outlets but also to sentiment seen on social media and within texts. The use of non-sports influencers continued to be common, and a press conference once again demonstrated how media outlets themselves could shape how much attention Sam would receive. ESPN reported that audience interest led to the network’s focus on the story. Some measures showed audience interest in the story while others railed against a perceived media-created agenda.

**Queer media**

**The final days before the draft: final queer media predictions.** Days before the draft, Outsports reported it was hearing positive feedback from some sources. The outlet stated that NFL.com’s Judy Battista was told “by more than one personnel executive that they think there are owners who will push their people to draft [Sam] because they think it is time for this ceiling to be broken” (Zeigler, 2014m, para. 2). Outsports shared Battista’s “fourth or fifth round” prediction, citing Sam’s strong Pro Day (para. 7). Outsports also quoted Bleacher Report’s Mike Freeman who said he had spoken with many people who were predicting a fifth-round selection (para. 8). Freeman’s commentary demonstrated how the selection of facts shaped one’s view:
some of [Sam’s] postseason testing wasn’t as good as [teams] wanted to see and the NFL is obsessed with numbers. The chance he has to go higher is if a team ignores the testing and just goes by what he did on tape (para. 8).

Outsports sourced other predictions that ranged from a third-to-seventh round assessment (Zeigler, 2014m). The outlet also shared an NFL Network report that said some thought Sam might not be drafted at all (para. 6). Zeigler himself predicted Sam would be picked up in round three or four (para. 18). Queer media included many sources that were much more positive about Sam’s draft prospects than did mainstream coverage. From an audience perspective, 65% of Outsports readers thought Sam would be drafted between the first and fifth rounds – indicating queer media readers thought highly of Sam’s chances (Zeigler, 2014m).

The return of anonymous sources. In the final days before the draft, another story entirely based on anonymous league sources was once again a focus of media discussion.

Outsports (Zeigler, 2014n) picked up an article in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, written by Bob McGinn, that sourced anonymous scouts (2014). McGinn reported that twelve of the 21 scouts would not select Sam in the draft at all (para. 7). The article summarized,

The reason you don't hear much about Sam anymore a few days before the draft is this is the time for real players. Based on discussions over the last month about Sam's capability as a player with about two dozen NFL executives in personnel, he's regarded almost as a non-entity (para. 5).

The piece received wide attention, being shared in outlets from CBS Sports (Katzowitz, 2014) to The Atlantic (Snyder, 2014).

Outsports addressed and countered the anonymous arguments, one piece titled: “Chances Sam Gets Drafted – 99.99%” (Zeigler, 2014n). Beyond McGinn, the article was also in response to Nate Silver’s statistical predictions that estimated there was a 50% chance Sam would not be drafted. The piece noted “Michael Sam detractors seem to be coming out of the woodwork this week” (para. 1). Advocate Wade Davis explained why these statements were being said off-the-record: “When you see anonymous people and people who are leaking stories, they’re afraid that
their good old football is going to look a lot different. And it’s not” (Babb, 2014b, para. 4).

**Queer media as a pro-Sam advocate.** Queer media once again acted as pro-Sam advocates. As the draft approached, *Outsports* began urging supporters to share #SamFans on fan social media pages (Zeigler, 2014o). “It’s a huge moment for the LGBT community,” the outlet wrote (para. 2). *Outsports* demonstrated the relationship between queer media and advocacy groups by partnering with GLAAD on the initiative, noting: “To build excitement, members of the LGBT Sports Coalition will be tweeting #Sam Fans” (para. 2).

**Selection Saturday and post-selection reactions.** *Outsports* posted frequently during the draft. These posts often sourced updates from other outlets, such as a note that *ESPN* was “cutting away to (a) gay sports bar” to gauge queer reactions (Zeigler, 2014p, para. 1). One *Outsports* audience member predicted events about to occur: “If two guys happen to start kissing will ESPN cameras suddenly cut away?” (Audience, 2014tt).

Upon Sam’s seventh-round selection, *Outsports* argued the result was not out of line with expectations, noting “Sam’s subpar performance at the NFL Combine likely hurt his draft stock a bit” (Zeigler, 2014q, para. 2). Following its initial analysis, the outlet was relatively celebratory in its posts. One article was entirely based on a Michael Sam tweet that showed Sam donning a St. Louis Rams hat (Zeigler, 2014r). Over 15,000 people shared the tweet (Zeigler, 2014r). Another *Outsports* post shared a tweet from a *CBS Chicago* reporter that announced requests for Sam jerseys were high (Zeigler, 2014s). *Outsports* cited an NFL spokesperson who called the sales “unprecedented for a Day 3 pick” (Zeigler, 2014t, para. 7). The *Outsports* article was picked up by *Queerty* (Tharrett, 2014c) and shared on Athlete Ally’s Twitter page (Athlete, 2014aa). Another *Outsports* posting was entirely based on “How … NFL players react(ed) to Michael Sam being drafted…” citing player Twitter responses, many of which were retweeted by
hundreds or thousands of followers (Zeigler, 2014u). These findings again showed how venues shaped – and shared – each other’s stories.

On May 12th, Outsports promoted a story about a 15-year-old who came out to his dad during the draft (Zeigler, 2014v). Of note, Zeigler described the source of the story: “Michael Sam’s publicist Howard Bragman brings this story posted on the University of Missouri Facebook page” (para. 1). The example demonstrated how a single post on a university Facebook page was picked up by a publicist and shared with a friendly news source.

Finally, Outsports – like mainstream media – covered Sam’s post-draft Rams press conference and highlighted the media focus on the event: “NFL Network reports that 100 media credentials have been issued. Similar press conferences in the past have seen only 15 credentials…” (Zeigler, 2014w, para. 13).

**In summary: Queer media draft coverage.** Prior to the draft, predictions advanced on Outsports were more positive than ESPN. Queer coverage again critiqued off-the-record comments that were critical of Sam. For the second time, a story entirely based on anonymous league sources built a significant amount of media attention. Outsports shared positive stories that drove coverage in other queer outlets and among advocacy groups. Queer outlets continued to demonstrate a heavy reliance on social media sources, coupled with an ability to share content generated by Michael Sam himself. Finally, a father’s Facebook post demonstrated how audience-generated social media made its way to a publicist who then forwarded it to a national outlet for coverage.
Advocacy organizations

Queer advocacy groups were also quite active in the days leading up to the NFL draft. Post-draft, they were celebratory in nature.

**Leading up to the draft.** Days before the draft, GLAAD, Athlete Ally, and the Human Rights Campaign all drove positive discussion of Sam through their websites and social media pages. As referenced, GLAAD partnered with *Outsports* to develop a #SamFans campaign across the org’s controlled media forums (Davis, 2014a). The social media campaign rallied supporters to promote Sam throughout the week (GLAAD, 2014m). For example, one tweet promoted a contest on *Outsports* to guess when Sam would be drafted (GLAAD, 2014n). GLAAD promoted #SamFans for several days (GLAAD, 2014o). These efforts demonstrated a social media tactic that was not simply one-way communication but a collective effort.

Athlete Ally re-shared GLAAD’s tweets (2014bb): “Tweet #SamFans if you’re rooting for @MikeSamFootball during the #NFLDraft2014! via @glaad” The use of #NFLDraft2014 allowed the queer-supportive campaign to be seen by any readers of the draft hashtag, inherently including many NFL fans who were not followers of the advocacy organizations; thus, the message was spread beyond queer-media boundaries. GLAAD – on its own social media pages – further shared Athlete Ally, demonstrating the cooperative work of the orgs (GLAAD, 2014p).

**Draft reaction and support.** Following Sam’s selection, queer organizations promoted the event across their controlled media platforms. GLAAD asked fans to share an org-generated Facebook image “to congratulate Michael Sam and the St. Louis Rams” (2014q). Another GLAAD post asked fans to “Change your profile pic to celebrate history being made in the NFL! #SamFans” (GLAAD, 2014r). The shareable image was of rainbow-colored foam fingers.
GLAAD used an arsenal of strategic messages to celebrate Sam’s drafting across the organization’s platforms. For example, on Twitter, GLAAD distributed the *Outsports* article that announced Sam’s selection (GLAAD, 2014s) and shared a tweet from other athletes in support of Sam (GLAAD, 2014t). GLAAD used its blog to comment on the story (Adam, 2014a), and President Sarah Kate Ellis was featured in an official press release, where she remarked: “Without a doubt, this is a game changer … [Sam has] tackled stereotypes and joins the ranks of athletic trailblazers like Jason Collins and Brittney Griner in showing Americans that there’s no place for homophobia on the field” (GLAAD, 2014u). The press release also demonstrated a relationship between GLAAD and the NFL as the advocacy group took the time to promote how the NFL had instituted pro-LGBT employment policies and was an active supporter of GLAAD’s anti-bullying Spirit Day (para. 7-10). In total, GLAAD promoted Sam across all of its platforms, in many instances using one platform to lead to another. Through more traditional means, GLAAD promoted the NFL’s pro-queer policies.

While organizations used some of the same tactics, Athlete Ally and the HRC also had their own unique strategies. Ally also celebrated Sam’s selection across Facebook and Twitter (Athlete, 2014cc). Its initial Facebook post congratulating Sam was liked by over 800 followers and shared by smaller LGBT-advocacy organizations, some of which had over 1,000 followers of their own (Athlete, 2014dd). Ally also promoted the news on its blog, calling the NFL “a powerful cultural force” and stating that Sam’s selection could “go a long way for broad based LGBT acceptance and equality throughout society” (Athlete, 2014ee, para. 5). Consistent with the organization’s spring tactics, the post used many quotes from straight allied athletes to make its arguments. For example, youth programs leader Akil Patterson’s referenced race: “Michael’s ability to be a proud Black gay NFL player illustrates that anything is possible in today’s NFL”
Ally also retweeted supportive tweets of Sam posted by professional allied athletes (Athlete, 2014ff) and coaches (Athlete, 2014gg).

The HRC posted a blog titled, “Trailblazer Michael Sam Drafted to NFL” (Human, 2014g). The post included a YouTube video of Sam’s draft response, as well as a shareable image of Sam waving with a promotional text asking fans to “Send Michael a virtual high-five now.” More than 2,900 people on Facebook and over 500 on Twitter shared the post and image (Human, 2014g). Consistent with its youth initiatives, the HRC emphasized:

Today, #LGBT young people can look to [Sam] as proof that being open and proud of who you are doesn’t keep you from achieving your dreams. Michael Sam, the St. Louis Rams and the NFL community are providing hope to millions of LGBT young people across the country and around the world (Human, 2014h).

This Facebook post obtained over 20,000 likes and over 2,300 shares, again demonstrating the organization’s power within the movement (Human, 2014h). The HRC also used Twitter to ask followers to support its “high five” campaign (Human, 2014i), offer congratulations to Michael Sam directly (Human, 2014j), and further spread pro-Sam messages by retweeting comments issued by the NFL (NFL, 2014a), the St. Louis Rams (St., 2014a), and Jason Collins (Collins, 2014). The HRC also retweeted an NFL.com post that compiled a list of social media responses to the news (NFL, 2014b). The linked-to article included supportive tweets from current athletes, the NFL, the Rams, allied members of Athlete Ally and celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres and John Legend (Fischer, 2014). DeGeneres’s tweet – “So proud of the @STLouisRams for showing there’s nothing to be afraid of. Congratulations, @MikeSamFootball” – obtained over 5,000 retweets (DeGeneres, 2014b) and was shared more than any other supplied tweet in the post (Fischer, 2014). This again illustrated the impact non-sports opinion leaders had on the story.
In the days after Sam’s selection, Ally promoted Sam’s press conference via Twitter (Athlete, 2014hh), and shared Sam’s statements from the event: “It’s okay to be who you are … it’s okay to be comfortable in your own skin” (Athlete, 2014ii). Ally also used the platform to urge fans to buy Sam jerseys (Athlete, 2014jj). An HRC tweet shared video from the conference in which Sam stated to youth, “If Someone Disowns You, Be Part of My Family” (Human, 2014k).

**In summary: Advocacy groups and the draft.** Advocacy organizations were highly involved in promoting Sam prior to the draft. Each organization promoted content from other queer organizations and queer outlets. By using popular hashtags such as #NFLDraft2014, organizational messages were able to reach broader audiences who may not have been followers of these queer organizations. While the organizations had many strategic similarities, they also used media in unique ways. GLAAD – through formal information subsidies such as press releases – drew attention to the NFL’s inclusive policies. Ally continued to use allied athletes as spokespeople while the HRC highlighted impact on LGBT youth. Once again, these organizations served as their own content generators, driving frames and awareness across several of their own media channels while also using these channels to promote supportive commentary from other individuals or organizations.

**The kiss**

One of the most covered moments of Sam’s tale happened during the draft. *ESPN* cameras captured Sam’s response upon receiving a phone call from Rams coach Jeff Fisher. After hanging up, an emotional Sam hugged and kissed his boyfriend, Vito Cammisano. Later in the night, more video showed the two celebrating by covering each other’s faces in cake. The
kiss obtained much media attention and debate. This section will break down how the kiss was initially covered, caused a negative reaction from an NFL player, demonstrated the influence of the Associated Press, produced a responsive campaign by advocacy orgs, and was labeled an important cultural moment.

**Initial news coverage.** To best examine the unique manner in which this story built across media channels, this section will lay out coverage of the kiss as it unfolded, combining reaction from mainstream and queer news outlets. Much of the initial mainstream media coverage did not address the kiss, at least not directly (Wagoner, 2014e). As the kiss was part of Sam’s immediate reaction to the draft announcement, the lip lock was inevitably shown in video coverage, though many mainstream news articles did not explicitly mention the intimacy. Others spoke of a kiss without indicating the gay context. For example, the *Post-Dispatch* (5.10) wrote, “[W]ith ESPN cameras rolling, Sam broke down in tears. There were kisses, there were hugs, there were more tears. Tears of joy” (Thomas, 2014h, para. 5).

Some of the first outlets to draw attention to the same-sex kiss were queer outlets. *Outsports* created a post especially for the intimate moment, its headline: “ESPN shows Michael Sam kissing his boyfriend Vito” (Zeigler, 2014x). The post obtained over 3,100 shares and linked to a YouTube video. *Queerty* also highlighted the gay nature: “Sam shared tears of joy – and several beautiful kisses – with his boyfriend upon the learning of the news...” (Bull, 2014, para. 3). The article also linked to a YouTube video that had over 3.7 million views (Thornburgh, 2014). A *New York Times* article that night also highlighted the moment: “Reaction to the selection of Sam, who was shown on television celebrating his selection and kissing his boyfriend, was swift” (Belson, 2014, para. 11).
By Sunday, many mainstream outlets began treating the kiss more as a focal point of the story. The *Post-Dispatch* now wrote,

Sam sealed the news with a kiss — literally. ESPN had a camera crew in La Jolla, Calif., at the house where Sam was watching the draft, and after he took the call from Rams coach Jeff Fisher, Sam kissed his boyfriend several times on the mouth (Matter, 2014d, para. 11).

Consistent with the *Post-Dispatch* trend of using Cyd Zeigler as a source, the piece quoted his analysis of how important the kiss was: “ESPN did not shy away from an NFL draftee kissing his boyfriend … and I thought that was incredibly powerful and reflects where we are in sports today” (para. 11).

Some outlets quickly popularized Vito Cammisano, such as a *New York Daily News* article that interviewed his family (Beekman, 2014). The *Daily News* summarized how “[t]he kissing photo … went viral instantly” (para. 4). Articles such as the *Daily News* shared photos from Cammisano’s personal social media pages, images of him and Sam that were posted long before the famous kiss. As these photos had been publicly available, it’s unclear whether these outlets had known about them and declined to publish them until a salient moment or if outlets were simply unaware. Queer media also focused on Cammisano as *Queerty’s* article – “Introducing Vito Cammisano, Michael Sam’s Hot Swimmer Boyfriend” – distributed pictures from Cammisano’s Instagram and Twitter pages (Tracer, 2014c).

It should be noted that Peter King – the influential *Sports Illustrated* reporter who released the anonymous sources story in February – highlighted the kiss in his post-draft wrap-up. While Sam was a seventh-round pick and the wrap-up documented highlights from the entire draft, King’s headline read: “The 2014 NFL Draft: Sealed With a Kiss” (2014b). This headline – with its focus not only on Sam but also the non-football aspects of his drafting – drew criticisms from *Outsports*’ Cyd Zeigler (2014y). The *Outsports* writer complained that mainstream
journalists took many opportunities to criticize Sam for not focusing on football, only to themselves drive narratives that focused on Sam as the “gay football player” (para. 11).

The kiss coverage was therefore mainstream media created – captured by ESPN cameras – but flowed through a myriad of channels to obtain national awareness.

The Associated Press addresses the kiss: how a story became a story. As excitement and criticism about the kiss developed, an Associated Press story – distributed on ESPN and many other outlets – addressed the kiss and the decision to show it (Associated, 2014b). In the piece, “Networks Don’t Hesitate on Sam,” the AP said, “For some, the reaction was joy. For others, there was dismay or even anger. For the networks that carried and repeatedly aired the scene, it was business as usual” (para. 4). The AP article illuminated behind-the-scenes realities that affected coverage and story development. The piece interviewed ESPN producer Seth Markman, who said the network never gave much thought to showing the kiss (para. 5). Describing themselves as “a young production crew,” Markman said when he “got home … and saw the attention, it kind of threw [him]” (para. 7). A single network was able to build so much attention because ESPN was the only crew given access, causing an agreement with other outlets like the NFL Network to show ESPN’s coverage (para. 9). The piece noted how serendipitous timing had an effect on the story’s play “since Sam's selection came near the draft's conclusion and the networks could stick with Sam instead of quickly moving on to another pick” (para. 12). Markman said that the network had long showed “players kissing their girlfriends” (para. 13), countering an argument that some outlets and audiences developed that claimed the kiss was only shown because of its gay nature.

The much-distributed wire story was filled by many of the pro-queer voices at the center of this study, such as GLAAD’s President Sarah Kate Ellis, who was reportedly “thrilled” the
kiss was broadcasted so publicly (Associated, 2014b, para. 15). Wade Davis, of the You Can Play Project, was quoted to address the moment’s cultural impact: “The definition of masculinity shifted today, whether consciously or not, because during the hypermasculine NFL draft, a man kissed another man on national television” (para. 19). Yet, Davis, in part, defended critics of the kiss by arguing they were “not necessarily … homophobic” but were reacting because they were not used to such a kiss, implying the importance of the image (para. 21). The AP also sourced Howard Bragman, who combatted arguments that the kiss may have been staged, as the AP said it was “not a plotted-out statement” (para. 22). While the article gave a strong voice to the ESPN and NFL Network producers and individuals from the LGBT-rights movement, the AP summarized criticism of the kiss in the following: “Some online postings deplored the kiss as inappropriate for family viewing; others were even harsher in their distaste” (para. 24). The wire story then concluded with an arguably pro-LGBT voice: “When Markman's wife explained to their 7-year-old son that his father was busy working on something that was controversial, Sam's kiss on TV, the boy replied: ‘Is it because they're not married?’” (para. 27).

The widely shared AP story demonstrated the power of a wire service. The AP’s covering the story established how a media-created moment could become the focus of such broad attention. Finally, prominent pro-queer voices were coupled with leading media voices while sourcing of critics was minimal, showing how wire stories were just as susceptible to being shaped by their inclusion of particular sources.
The kiss and Don Jones

Consistent with coverage from earlier in the year that focused on any negative comments made about Sam by a fellow athlete, a single tweet from Miami Dolphins player Don Jones about the kiss obtained national coverage.

Don Jones: Mainstream media. Following ESPN’s showing of the kiss, Jones posted on his Twitter account “OMG” and “horrible” (Walker, 2014a, para. 2). The tweets, though soon deleted, caused a swift media response, obtaining coverage in multiple ESPN stories (Walker, 2014a; Walker, 2014b). ESPN’s headline – “Another Dolphin in Twitter Trouble” – demonstrated how it was not the first time such an agenda-building activity occurred (Walker, 2014b). The story stimulated significant audience reaction on ESPN, receiving over 23,000 Facebook shares (Walker, 2014b). Many ESPN audiences were supportive of Jones: “Whether we like what he said or not the dude has a right to his opinion and his beliefs just like EVERYONE else” (Audience, 2014uu). Yet, the counter-response was also widely supported: “And Miami has the right to respond to an employee's comment as they see fit” (Audience, 2014vv).

The ESPN Dolphins beat argued, “Dolphins must educate on social media” (Walker, 2014c). The beat also noted why the single tweet obtained such coverage: “During a historic moment for the NFL and society in general, Jones was the only known player in the league to publicly bash Sam” (Walker, 2014d, para. 5). As a response, the Dolphins immediately suspended and fined Jones, and Jones apologized via a team statement (Walker, 2014d).

From a mainstream audience perspective, as the tweet came in response to coverage on ESPN, which then led to criticism of the tweet by ESPN reporters, one reader blamed the network for being the cause of the problem:
The problem isn’t Michael Sam, the problem is ESPN. Michael Sam should live in whatever way makes him happiest and most fulfilled. Donald Jones was reacting to ESPN forcing a social issue and lifestyle choice down everyone’s throat by showing that PDA over and over and over and over and over and over again. Did they show any other draft pick kissing someone on the lips? No. Have they ever shown any other draft pick kissing someone on the lips repeatedly throughout the following days? Absolutely not (Audience, 2014ww).

**Don Jones: Queer media and advocacy response.** Many queer outlets criticized this type of audience perception of reality, noting that male-female kisses were often shown in draft celebrations. For example, *Outsports* responded to negative kiss reaction with a satirical but pointed piece: “Gross, Disgusting. Weird, Watching NFL players kiss wives, girlfriends” (Buzinski, 2014h). The outlet focused on what it deemed were hypocritical reactions depending on the sexuality of the athletes shown kissing. The article shared negative Twitter reactions to Sam’s kiss, but – instead of posting the comments under photos of Sam and Cammisano – *Outsports* placed them under photos of straight male athletes kissing women. The article obtained 15,000-plus shares on Facebook and over 600 tweets. While some readers argued *Outsports* “should be above this” (Audience, 2014xx), other commenters argued it was appropriate because of negative reactions, such as a link to a *TMZ* post with many homophobic remarks (Audience, 2014yy). GLAAD (Adam, 2014b) and the HRC (McCarty, 2014a) each posted blog responses to the Jones incident, their posts generally giving a recitation of the events that had transpired.

The Jones coverage thus illustrated how a kiss on mainstream media led to negative reaction by a single player on social media. Once again, media outlets jumped on the opportunity to discuss any anti-queer reaction from other players, leading to yet more cycles of media reaction and social media feedback.
Audience reaction to the kiss

Many ESPN audience comments were particularly critical of the kiss, the more subdued being, “Not a homophobe, also don’t want to see two men kissing on ESPN” (Audience, 2014zz). Other critical comments called the kiss “the worst thing ever” (Audience, 2014aaa) or complained, “we don't have to see him sticking his tongue down his boyfriends throat. it is now a big deal because he has a ‘little’ white boy” (Audience, 2014bbb). The argument that the media had an agenda remained prevalent,

The way this ‘business’ works is to force agendas. ESPN is no exception, they are one of the most biased news agencies in this "business" you're explaining to us. ESPN is one of several news outlets talking about this 24/7, force-feeding the public it's pro-gay agenda (Audience, 2014ccc).

Some sarcastic comments in favor of Sam attempted to counter these reactions:

Was so disgusted when they showed AJ McCarron kissing his girlfriend on TV. If you're straight, cool. But you don't have to shove it in everyone's face in public like that. … Way to push the hetero agenda on America, ESPN (Audience, 2014ddd).

As negative as they were, many of the ESPN comments seemed to be representative of broader public sentiments. A Huffington Post/YouGov poll of the American public found that 47% of people thought it “‘inappropriate’ for networks to show the kiss, while only 36% said it was ‘appropriate’” (Swanson, 2014, para. 6).

The kiss: the role of advocacy organizations

While news coverage described its own role in how the kiss went viral, advocacy organizations were also quite active in promoting the intimate moment. On Saturday evening, GLAAD’s Facebook page quickly shared the photo, commenting, “We love this pic of Michael Sam celebrating being drafted by the St. Louis Rams!” (GLAAD, 2014v). The image was liked by over 2,900 people and shared by over 600 more. While the post obtained many positive comments, audience discussion of racism was also mentioned as one poster stated, “So beautiful!
However, I am starting to hear insults resulting from the fact that he’s in an interracial relationship more than the insults about him being gay” (Audience, 2014eee). Other GLAAD followers noted, “props to ESPN for not cutting away as Sam & his boyfriend kissed multiple times” (Audience, 2014fff). While the HRC did not focus on the kiss in its initial Facebook post congratulating Sam, audience members on the well-trafficked Facebook page did (Human, 2014l). One commenter shared a YouTube link of the video (Audience, 2014ggg). This served as an example of how audience members promoted certain aspects of a story by utilizing the social media platform of an advocacy organization.

By May 14th, leading gay-rights commentator Michelangelo Signorile obtained significant attention with his call for a “Great Facebook Kiss-In” in a column written on The Huffington Post (2014). The column – which obtained over 3,200 likes – illustrated how news, social media, and some input from advocacy organizations built an online movement. With Sam’s kiss as a catalyst, a series of media interactions led to Signorile’s call for a social media kissing campaign. After being interviewed on a CNN program the day prior, Signorile described the flow of events after the CNN host:

wondered if "the kiss" would be a problem with the other players on the team. This reflected what we've seen in much of the media, some of it coming from much more hostile quarters. People just aren't used to seeing two men or two women kissing, even with all the news coverage of gay marriage. Judging by some of the reactions to the Sam/Cammisano kiss, I'm not sure what they think gay men in relationships do. Play checkers? (Well, maybe sometimes.) We see straight people kissing all the time, all over television, in magazines, in films, on the Internet. A lot of people who consider themselves pro-gay probably are uneasy about seeing gays kissing, just like a lot of people who in the past said they supported interracial marriage were probably uneasy when they saw two straight people of different races kissing (and some still are). And in this case, it's a gay black man and a gay white man kissing. Mark Joseph Stern wrote a terrific piece on Slate about how all of this means one thing: Gay people need to be kissing more in public. There simply needs to be more queer smooching to desensitize the world. So with that, I hereby launch the Great Facebook Kiss-In, urging everyone -- whether gay, straight or bi -- to change their profile pics to two women kissing or two men kissing (2014, para. 4-6).

While Signorile was himself a celebrity within the gay-rights movement – hosting a Sirius XM radio show and having a voice on The Huffington Post – his call for a kiss campaign was further built by advocacy organizations. The same day, the Human Rights Campaign
distributed Signorile’s call, urging supporters to use #kissin online and even directing fans to obtain copyright free photos on WikiCommons if they needed images (Miller, H., 2014a, para. 4). Athlete Ally posted an opinion piece on its blog that argued, “The World Needs to See Michael Sam kiss his boyfriend” (Greene, 2014). The Ally piece noted how Sam’s kiss “ignited an impassioned public discourse” and was written in response to the negative feedback of the kiss on venues such as ESPN’s *Outside the Lines* (para. 1-3).

On May 15th, the kiss-in campaign was picked up by Queerty, which cited the call of the *Huffington Post* piece by Signorile (Tharrett, 2014d). Queerty described the process of events: “Beginning yesterday afternoon, a number of people started the movement by changing their profile pictures on Twitter and Facebook to a photo of a gay couple smooching” (para. 2). One Queerty commenter hoped Sam and Cammisano would become gay relationship role models, replacing a figurehead couple within the community at the time: “Nothing against Tom Daly and Dustin Lance Black but can we not see any more of them in favor of this new representation of such revolution?” (Audience, 2014hhh). The advancement of the kiss-in continued as GLAAD picked up the movement the next day, the org posting on its blog and referencing back to the *Huffington Post* article (Garcia, 2014). GLAAD also promoted the kiss-in through its Twitter feed (2014w). While the catalyst of the kiss began on a mainstream outlet, advocacy organizations used the moment to facilitate a broader conversation about queer public displays of affection. Organizations promoted social media visibility as a means to change public perception of queer intimacy.
The kiss: Findings on power, gender and sexuality

As the initial wave of kissing coverage subsided, a round of analysis addressed the impact of the preceding event. Once again, ESPNW offered a critical voice against much of the mainstream coverage. Sarah Spain’s piece, “Reaction to Sam’s moment is telling,” broadened the debate to issues of sports media coverage of gender:

In the months leading up to the draft, the Internet was abuzz over the lovely ladies attached to some of college football's best players. Rare was the sports site that didn't have some sort of photo gallery of NFL draft wives and girlfriends (WAGs), along with whatever info they could scrounge up on them via social media. … The ladies stole the pre-draft hype, but by the end of Day 3, it wasn't Webb or Duke earning the headlines, it was Michael Sam's boyfriend, Vito Cammisano. No “Hot and Sexy” photo galleries for Cammisano, though. … While many found the moment to be touching and inspiring, some complained about the behind-the-scenes look at the couple's celebration. (2014, para. 7-9)

After summarizing the kiss criticism that was shared on social media, local television programs, and national political shows, Spain responded:

So months of leering at AJ McCarron's fiancee and endless bikini pics of Blake Bortles' girlfriend are welcome, but a few moments of Sam with his significant other constitutes ‘a dog and pony show?’ A kiss between Sam and Cammisano is an over-the-top affront to morality, but the McCarron-Webb on-the-field, post-game kisses we saw so often were sweet? … The broadcast of Sam and Cammisano kissing on draft day was a historic moment, not only for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, but for the NFL and pro sports (2014, 18-25).

Influential New York Times columnist Frank Bruni also argued how important it was to see gay couples kiss publicly (2014b). Noting how “a kiss is everything. A kiss can stop the world” (para. 2), Bruni argued, “The football player Michael Sam recently demonstrated as much” (para. 3). Bruni noted how even as a gay person of a certain age, “the initial, internal reaction that I and many other gay people had to the way Sam clutched and kissed his boyfriend on national TV wasn’t exultation. It was alarm. Had he gone too far?” (para. 19). Calling Sam’s actions “heroic,” he said such a moment in the gay rights movement was “something to behold. It was something to hold on to” (para. 22).

Weeks later, the kiss demonstrated its lasting impact as the St. Louis Post-Dispatch labeled it as “the most famous kiss in draft history” (Matter, 2014e), Out Magazine called it “the
most famous gay kiss of all time” (Glazek, 2014, para. 2), and ESPN’s Dan Graziano wrote a commentary arguing,

    I like that the Rams did draft Michael Sam, and that he kissed his boyfriend on ESPN, because I tend to like anything that might lead members of the human race to treat other members of the human race better. That was a watershed moment for anyone who fights for or cares about gay rights and tolerance. For all that Sam and others have said about viewing him as "just a football player," he is quite obviously more than that (2014e, para. 9).

    Many news commenters thus recognized the cultural importance of Sam’s publicly seen kiss. While mainstream coverage often focused on whether it was appropriate to show the images, other outlets took the opportunity to demonstrate how the event – as well as the media debate about it – spoke to broader issues of culture, gender, sexuality, and power.

Chapter VII conclusion

    This chapter’s findings demonstrated how a unifying event like the draft – an occasion that itself was media-driven – focused a significant amount of coverage on a single moment in time. In the final days before the draft, mainstream and queer media outlets varied in their predictions on when Sam would be chosen, their forecasts based on which selection of facts was considered most relevant. Once again, anonymous sources speaking ill of Sam’s chances obtained national coverage, causing other outlets to respond to the frames that were being promoted. While many outlets wondered why Sam had been drafted so low, justifications turned back to issues of skill, homophobia, and distractions.

    Sam’s public kiss dominated initial reaction to his selection. While many mainstream outlets initially avoided explicit references, others led with the scene of intimacy. Within hours, pro-queer supporters treated the kiss as a historic moment. Anti-Sam individuals also promoted the kiss as an illustration of why Sam was considered immoral or a distraction to a team. News processes – such as ESPN’s exclusive access and the timing of the selection – also broadened the
moment’s reach. The work of queer advocacy groups to generate social media support allowed
the debate to further widen. Finally, influential columnists used reactions to the kiss to speak to
wider implications involving power, sexism, and homophobia within media and society.
CHAPTER VIII: Summer: From Oprah Winfrey to Tony Dungy

As the draft ended, summer discussion of Michael Sam addressed a host of topics. This chapter will break down these events individually to demonstrate how and when coverage converged, as well as when it did not.

Oprah Winfrey

By mid-May, much Sam coverage focused on reports that Oprah Winfrey’s television network, OWN, had signed a deal with Sam to film a docu-series about his attempts to make the NFL. Many outlets and audiences took an extremely negative view of the deal, though this tone took days to emerge. Because the Winfrey story featured multiple interacting conversation threads that showed dramatic changes with each day, this section will combine coverage from all outlets into a single chronological thread.

While news outlets prominently picked up the story on Wednesday, May 14th, following a press release from OWN, the Rams knew about the show the prior Saturday night or Sunday morning, just hours after Sam’s drafting by the team (A. Twyman, personal communication, March 6, 2015). In a conversation between the Rams’ Artis Twyman and Howard Bragman, Twyman shared with Bragman that he thought Sam should not do any media, otherwise “this kid isn’t going to survive” (A. Twyman, personal communication, March 6, 2015). Twyman said he had been “inundated with calls” from news outlets for interview requests. Bragman agreed but said there were “five things … already in the works.” This included People Magazine, GQ
Magazine, Outsports, the ESPYs, and the Winfrey docu-series. When they got to the OWN series, Twyman responded,

weeeelllll, let’s talk about the documentary … Howard, we’ve got to talk about this, I said, because those others ones, you know, he’ll do those interviews, but this, they’re going to be around the facility, that’s going to be something we’re going to have to talk about…

Twyman said the team thought it was “a great story” worth telling, “but we couldn’t have that being a distraction to the team, that’s one thing you’ll find a lot of NFL teams, that they don’t like distractions…” (personal communication, March 6, 2015).

On Monday the 12th and Tuesday the 13th, Twyman was “going back and forth” with Sam and OWN’s people, “kinda seeing what it looked like” (personal communication, March 6, 2015). On Tuesday, the team had its post-draft press conference, and Twyman described the messaging goals of that event: “Michael Sam is focused on, he wants to be a football player…”

While discussions about the docu-series were ongoing, a press release was distributed by OWN and Sam’s team on Wednesday (OWN, 2014). Twyman thought this caused a contrast in messaging:

[Sam] said, hey, I want to be a football player… Then on Wednesday, they send out the news release where they’re doing this docu-series… that… is in direct contrast to what we’re saying. I’m saying but this kid just wants to play football, he’s focused on playing football, but you’re doing this docu-series, where if you’re doing this docu-series, your focus is not on football. And so, on that Wednesday and Thursday, that’s what the media were saying, hey listen, this kids focus in not on football… (personal communication, March 6, 2015).

By May 14th, several outlets began reporting about the series. Outsports reported Sam would be in an OWN “documentary series” and said the team was “aware of the series and is working with the producers” (Buzinski, 2014i, para. 1). Outsports also noted, “The NFL Network reported, however, that the team was unaware of the show when they drafted him” (para. 1). Outsports posted the OWN press release, demonstrating the information subsidy’s importance in shaping the coverage (para. 4). GLAAD’s blog similarly shared the press release,
calling the event a “docuseries” (Townsend, 2014b). GLAAD’s blog included large portions of the OWN press release verbatim.

ESPN Rams reporter Nick Wagoner had a different reaction, his headline reading: “Will documentary distract Sam from goal?” (Wagoner, 2014f). The headline connected the series to one of the spring’s ongoing negative media frames: distraction. Similar to Twyman’s concerns about Sam’s messaging, ESPN argued, “While it’s certainly understandable to want to document a groundbreaking, historic story, it also doesn’t seem conducive to making it all about football, which was the message Sam delivered repeatedly throughout his introductory news conference Tuesday” (para. 12). Counter to the NFL Network report on the Rams’ awareness, Wagoner said, “For their part, the Rams did not know about the Sam documentary before drafting him but were informed soon after the choice was made” (para. 12). ESPN said the Rams would not allow any special access for the show: “[T]he film crew will have the same media access as everyone else for anything taking place at Rams Park or any other team events” (para. 15). The ESPN report combined information dissemination with opinion by questioning Sam’s motives and inserting the distraction frame.

By Thursday, the ESPN Rams page still said the team approved of the project: “the Rams insist that the docuseries on Sam … will not be a distraction for the team” (Wagoner, 2014g, para. 3). Meanwhile, ESPN business reporter Darren Rovell’s article – “Oprah acquires rights to Sam series” – received huge audience traffic and reported that the project had long been in the works: “Cameras for the network were with Sam when he received the call that he was drafted and will follow him through training camp as he tries to make the team” (Rovell, 2014d, para. 3). Rovell’s article was a piece of business reporting, offering no opinion. The article’s content heavily used OWN’s press release.
Coverage tone quickly changed after two *ESPN* pieces became widely shared. In one, *ESPN* columnist Jason Whitlock responded critically (2014b). Whitlock argued the series was not only bad for Sam but also his LGBT fans:

I say this as a supporter of Michael Sam, I say it as a reformed homophobe, I say it as someone who believes the equality of black and brown people is connected to the equality and freedom granted to gays and lesbians: Michael Sam's decision to do a "documentary series" -- reality TV show -- on the Oprah Winfrey Network is a gigantic tactical error for Sam and his supporters within the LGBT community (para. 1-2).

As a point of emphasis, Whitlock began calling the project a “reality TV show.”

Whitlock claimed the series changed Sam’s brand, turning him from an “underdog football player fighting to find his place in the NFL” to “$am, the gay, in-your-face political/media pawn using the NFL as a platform to launch his celebrity brand” (para. 3). His criticisms even challenged the authenticity of Sam’s draft moment: “It all feels orchestrated now: the draft-day kiss; the cake-covered face; the tears; the celebration that conveniently captured just Sam, his boyfriend and his two agents; and even the ‘Stand with Sam’ T-shirts selling on michaelsam.com” (para. 7). Whitlock’s criticisms focused not on Sam but those advising him: “Michael Sam, the football player, is being used ... by everyone” (para. 10). He also blamed LGBT leaders: “The LGBT movement appears to be more concerned with Sam advancing the cause than making the roster” (para. 10).

Finally, Whitlock recast Sam’s entire journey by arguing against his skill:

He is simply not a good enough football player to travel with Oprah’s circus and the NFL’s. He needs to choose one. He's a seventh-round draft pick who ran a 4.91-second 40-yard dash at the combine. … Sam reported to the combine out of shape and embarrassed himself. He launched a website that is a merchandise store. He complained about being drafted too low. And now he's signing up for a reality show focused on his personal life and professional journey. He’s a seventh-round pick. This is preposterous. I support Michael Sam and the movement he represents. However, if I were Rams coach Jeff Fisher, I’d consider cutting $am today. He’s a marginal player with questionable focus on the game. Michael Sam thinks he's Jadeveon Clowney, a freakish defensive end with questionable passion for the game. Clowney could get away with a reality TV show, a merchandise store and scripted draft-day love scenes. … Michael $am is not the right play for the LGBT movement (para. 16-25).
Whitlock’s widely read column thus not only criticized Sam’s decision to do a “reality TV show,” but also downplayed Sam’s skill and authenticity by using the OWN series to re-insert every negative frame that had been debated throughout the spring.

A second critical ESPN article – posted on the site’s NFL page – also obtained wide attention. In the piece – “Player: Sam show may be a distraction” – ESPN again emphasized the distraction frame in its headline while resorting to the anonymous sourcing of a single player as the basis for an entire story (ESPN.com News, 2014h). Like the Whitlock column, the article began calling the OWN program a “reality show” (para. 1). The piece said the project “could potentially cause friction within the team” (para. 1) and went beyond the OWN program by using the single anonymous source to argue, “The player also isn't certain if teammates are truly embracing Sam's presence or just being politically correct when it comes to accepting the NFL's first openly gay player” (para. 3). Suddenly, the docu-series had become a catalyst to debate locker room comfort more broadly. The article included responsive comments that OWN and Sam’s management had made (para. 6-8), as well as NFL spokesperson Greg Aiello (para. 10); the piece saying the league was unaware of “the documentary prior to the draft” (para. 9). More than 11,000 readers shared the article. The anonymous player spoke with ESPN reporter Josina Anderson (para. 2).

Queerty’s coverage – which cited Outsports reports – remained generally neutral on the story (Tharrett, 2014e). Like other outlets prior to ESPN’s column and anonymous source story, Queerty frequently relied on quotes from the OWN statement, as well as Howard Bragman, who reiterated, “Michael is focused on football and making the St. Louis Rams team” (para. 3). Yet, audience reaction on the queer site was mostly negative. Again indicating audience cross-outlet interactions, one commenter referenced the ESPN anonymously sourced article: “Oh boy. Per
ESPN: An unidentified player on the St. Louis Rams says Michael Sam’s upcoming reality show on the Oprah Winfrey Network could potentially cause friction” (Audience, 2014iii). Another audience member shared Whitlock’s column and said his piece “brilliantly and fairly sumps up what a bad ideas this docuseries is for both Sam and the LGBT sports movement” (Audience, 2014jjj). Thus, while queer coverage continued to neutrally use official statements about the project, queer audiences began sharing the negative commentaries that were featured on ESPN.

By Friday, the story had completely changed. The Post-Dispatch reported its own version of who knew what and when:

The Rams learned Sunday what the NFL knew before the draft: Sam had agreed to allow the Oprah Winfrey Network to produce a ‘docu-series’ on his journey to an NFL roster. Unbelievably, the league had signed off on the project unbeknownst to its 32 member teams (Strauss, J. 2014c, para. 9).

Columnist Joe Strauss offered strikingly similar sentiments to Jason Whitlock, writing,

This was never going to be an easy journey for Sam. He is considered undersized for the NFL. Poor conditioning led to a 4.91-second 40 time and poor vertical jump that torpedoed his Combine. He launched a revenue-producing website. He arranged an autograph show in St. Louis. Now this (2014c, para. 19).

With so much negativity, the OWN program had a change of course. Outsports reported:

“After two days of criticism about the project, the Oprah Winfrey Network has postponed a documentary series about Michael Sam and his quest to be the first openly gay NFL player” (Buzinski, 2014j, para. 1). The outlet quoted a statement from Sam’s agent and the OWN network: “This will allow for Michael to have a total focus on football, and will ensure no distractions to his teammates” (para. 3). Outsports shared the media’s role in the story: “In the past two days, many media commentators supportive of Sam’s coming out questioned his doing the show, saying it contradicted his claim that all he wanted to do was focus on football,” an almost direct reference to Jason Whitlock’s arguments (para. 5).

ESPN announced the OWN change in an article by Darren Rovell (2014e). His reporting once again used an OWN statement as a primary source. The Post-Dispatch’s report on the
postponement similarly used the OWN statement as its lead source (Thomas, 2014i). Yet, the outlet now reported that the Rams were “blindsided when the Oprah network announced Wednesday that it was filming a multi-episode series … Rams officials and coaches were unaware of the project prior to the draft, and unhappy about it” (para. 4). The article did not cite the specific team officials who made such claims.

Artis Twyman said the change in plans became official when Sam’s agent Cameron Weiss, as well as the president of OWN, flew out to meet the Rams on Friday (personal communication, March 6, 2015). Twyman said the team and the network continued to work on the program but that it would not be aired until “the end of the season.” Not covered in media reports were internal relations dynamics that affected the Rams’ handling of the issue. “When we drafted [Sam], not one player called upset about us drafting Michael Sam,” Twyman said (personal communication, March 6, 2015). He continued,

> When this Oprah Winfrey thing came out, my phone rang off the hook … they’re like, ‘Artis, what is this? … man I’m not down with this, this is crazy,’ you know what I mean? So, players were concerned about, ‘hey listen, this is going to be, we don’t want this to be a distraction,’ more so than Michael Sam’s being gay…

Twyman said his role is to protect players, and he did not want an event like this to be a distraction for any of them, Sam included (personal communication, March 6, 2015).

Days later, ESPN quoted Rams coach Jeff Fisher, whose reactions offered further insight into the team’s handling of the story: “I think the Oprah thing, it caught us off-guard” (ESPN.com News, 2014i, para. 7). Yet, Fisher said he was optimistic about the program: “Whenever it takes place, I think it’ll be a positive piece” (para. 7). Fisher downplayed the distraction argument in a related Post-Dispatch piece, saying, “That thing settled down last week. We had a very productive meeting with the network. They understand our position; we understand theirs. We felt, and they collectively felt, the best thing to do was just to postpone it”
(Thomas, 2014j, para, 10). Thus, the public statements from Fisher – coupled with this study’s interviews – demonstrated different reactions from the team than were reported in coverage that was highly critical of Sam.

While much of the well-published commentary spoke out against the docu-series, not all coverage thought it good that the project was postponed. The Boston Globe’s Christopher Gasper thought the “series should have been OK’d” (2014). His column argued that much of the vitriol toward the program allowed people critical of Sam to finally apply the distraction frame:

Detractors couldn’t wait to brand Sam, who had said at the NFL Scouting Combine in February that he wanted to be seen as Michael Sam the football player, not Michael Sam the GAY football player, a hypocrite. Then the code word, distraction, got thrown around (para. 3).

Gasper claimed there was a double standard: “Other athletes have shared their personal lives on camera without the questioning of their professionalism. But somehow it’s Sam’s responsibility to expurgate his story for the comfort of others” (para. 4).

OWN did in fact air the footage as a one-night special – followed by a Winfrey sit-down interview with Sam – later in the year. Outsports’ final assessment of the media reaction to the OWN deal argued “everyone got Oprah Winfrey’s Michael Sam documentary so desperately wrong” (Zeigler, 2014y). Cyd Zeigler said the distraction argument was “bullshit” and called for the league and other media outlets to apologize to Sam (para. 5). He argued the series was a means for a young man to earn a living:

His Twitter handle is @MichaelSamNFL. They can send the apology there. They could also apologize for trying to limit Sam's earning potential. The rookie didn't get an NFL paycheck this season because he came out as gay. The docuseries represented a bit of a safeguard against that, a way for him to make some money as he figures out his NFL future. But “the experts” didn't care about Sam's personal well-being, they only cared about headlines and lashing out. They could also apologize for calling Sam a phony. The defensive end said he wanted to be known as a football player, not a gay football player. The same media accusing him of speaking out of both sides of his mouth is the same media that never heard his pleas in the first place. Did Peter King care that Sam didn't want to be known as a ‘gay football player’ when he lead his NFL Draft column with news of Sam's kiss and titled the piece, ‘Sealed with a kiss’? Nope. Yet suddenly he cared a few days later when it meant more good headlines and retweets (para. 9-11).
Zeigler thus claimed that these influential media figures – who shaped the agenda of how Sam’s story was told – directly harmed the young gay man’s life.

Zeigler described how group think overtakes coverage during such events: “When that story hit, Peter King and the rest of them became a lynch mob, and it was, it (inaudible) surprised me at just how quickly people got so nasty and go so mean” (personal communication, March 4, 2015). Zeigler added, “It was maddening to me to watch the media try to dismantle this kid after they had been ignoring what he said about wanting to be about being a football player in the first place” (personal communication, March 4, 2015).

**In summary: Oprah Winfrey.** Coverage of the OWN deal offered a mini case study of how information can flow through a hybrid media system. While initial reporting was dominated by the use of an OWN official statement, negative commentary made by an *ESPN* columnist – coupled with a story from a single anonymous source – drastically reshaped how the topic was discussed. Many outlets used the event to reapply anti-Sam frames. The impact of a single *ESPN* column or story was apparent as the coverage made its way to queer media, where audience members demonstrated how they obtained information from many outlets. The Rams’ internal dynamics also shaped the story, dynamics not seen in documents such as a press release.

**Summer frames: Making the team, and media and team reaction**

Much summer coverage discussed how Sam was fitting in, both in terms of media attention and team reaction. Other coverage focused on Sam’s perceived level of skill and whether it was enough to make the Rams’ season line-up. This section will analyze these issues from mid-May until Sam’s performance in July summer camp.
Sam’s fit: Mainstream media. Media attention continued to focus on whether Sam was a public distraction and to what extent he was fitting in with the team. Following the initial press conference after the draft, the ESPN Rams beat noted how quickly the press dissipated: “Less than an hour after … [the presser] … the majority of the circus tents have been pack up. All that remains for Sam to do is play football” (Wagoner, 2014h, para. 3). Yet, the Post-Dispatch claimed heavy media attention continued into Sam’s first practice with the team in mid-May: “There was a large media contingent on hand, more than most regular-season practices. With apologies to first-rounders … most were there to watch Sam” (Thomas, 2014k, para. 2).

Following his post-draft press conference, Sam did not speak to the press again until after a training session in early June. The ESPN Rams beat said that Sam was “feeling at home in St. Louis” as “[t]he majority of the media attention that once engulfed Sam … has moved on” (Wagoner, 2014i, para. 2). The declining media attention and Sam’s focus on football were also noticed that day by the Post-Dispatch, its headline reading: “Finally, football for Michael Sam” (Thomas, 2014l). The outlet said reporters had changed their line of questioning:

There was no media hullabaloo this time for Michael Sam. … The vast majority of the questions had to do with — surprise — football, rather than sexual orientation. … in speaking Friday to maybe a dozen reporters — as opposed to the 100 who greeted him at his introductory Rams news conference May 13 — Sam said the transition has been seamless so far (para. 1-7).

The Rams’ Artis Twyman said “it was awhile” before media attention died down and that all journalists wanted to do was talk to Sam (personal communication, March 6, 2015). The team only allowed Sam – as well as other players – to talk on pre-set days, limiting Sam’s availability for post-practice interviews to just a few days during the summer (A. Twyman, personal communication, March 6, 2015). Twyman’s comments reflected how journalistic practices and access shaped coverage as, following off-season training, Twyman said “things died down, cause everybody left, ya know, about the middle of June, everybody kinda leaves before training camp
starts the end of July, so it was kinda quiet during that time…” (personal communication, March 6, 2015).

ESPN soon reported that Wade Davis was brought in to speak with the Rams (Wagoner, 2014j). Countering the locker room distraction frame of the anonymous teammate report by Josina Anderson, ESPN’s Nick Wagoner noted how, “Davis was impressed when the first question from a player was ‘How do we support Michael?’” (para. 11). Yet, as media access was limited and no stories of team discomfort existed, coverage of Sam – at least temporarily – declined.

Upon the start of summer camp in late July, the New York Times reported attention had returned as Sam was “met (with) a crush of news media” (Rhoden, 2014a, para. 2), which the Post-Dispatch called “a larger-than-usual media group” (Lyons, 2014a, para. 7) This media contingent returned to asking non-football questions. Again asked if he was a trailblazer, Sam continued to respond, “I’m a football player” (Lyonsa, 2014, para. 3-4). Yet, the New York Times still ignored his claims, “whether he likes it or not, (Sam) is a trailblazer” (Rhoden, 2014a, para. 10). During this time, it was reported that Sam was fitting in well – the Post-Dispatch sourced coach Fisher in saying that the team was “treating him just like all the other rookies in the rookie class” (Lyonsa, 2014, para. 10).

Sam’s fit: Queer media. In early July, Outsports promoted Sam’s placement on the cover of queer outlet Out Magazine (Zeigler, 2014z), but mainstream outlets did not promote the story. Outsports noted how it was Sam’s first appearance “on the cover of a gay men’s magazine” (Zeigler, 2014z, para. 1). The Out interview – which received over 1,200 Facebook shares – chronicled how Sam “mistrusts the media,” noting how, “Worst of all, he had to read disapproving comments from his own father” in the New York Times (Glazek, 2014, para. 1-3).
Out argued the term "'big distraction,' (was) a term with no fixed meaning that has nonetheless played a decisive role in Sam’s tumultuous year (one of Sam’s agents told me he wants the word ‘distraction’ banned and removed from the dictionary)” (Glazek, 2014, para. 5).

The Out interview demonstrated how interpersonal factors between an interview subject and the reporter shape an interview. The article noted how Sam was happy to be interviewed once he found out the reporter was gay:

Suddenly Sam’s head perked up … His face melted into a smile; he inched his chair closer to the table and loosened the furrow in his brow. ‘I thought you guys were straight! That’s why I was giving you a hard time. … Whereas before Sam had refused to discuss his relationship, now he was busting out his phone and showing me pictures of his treasured man (Glazek, 2014, para. 13-14).

Outsports – like mainstream news – addressed the media attention Sam received at the start of summer camp in July. The outlet took umbrage with mainstream journalists’ asking Sam non-football questions; a blunt headline read: “When will reporters stop asking bullshit questions about Michael Sam?” (Zeigler, 2014aa). Outsports argued, “Why not just ask if the gay rookie defensive end is hitting on guys in the shower?” (para. 3). Zeigler continued by saying that the media themselves were the only distraction:

the biggest issue holding more gay athletes from coming out is the media. … The players don’t have an issue. The coaches don’t have an issue. No, it’s the media guys who sit most of the day at their computer instead of opening their eyes to the current state of pro sports: Gay athletes are welcome members of a team…and it’s your bullshit questions that are keeping any semblance of an issue alive (para. 4).

Like mainstream media, queer outlets reported that Sam was “fitting in well” with the team; Outsports quoted the Associated Press to justify its claims (Buzinski, 2014k, para. 1-2). The outlet also reported that Sam was at ease and “having fun,” sourcing photos from his Twitter feed of him smiling with veteran athletes (Buzinski, 2014k).

Making the team: Summer practice. May through July coverage also asked whether Sam would make the fall roster. Many late-round draft picks get cut following summer practice; teams need to reduce their roster size to fit within league rules. As a seventh-round choice on a
team with an already strong defensive line, Sam’s situation was tenuous from the start. The *ESPN* Rams page welcomed Sam to the team with a blunt headline: “Making roster will be tough task for Sam” (Wagoner, 2014k). While the article noted that that 47 of 48 players chosen in the 2013 seventh-round were on teams, many were not on a “game-day active roster” (para. 13). The *Post-Dispatch* similarly noted that Sam faced “tough competition” (Thomas, 2014m). After Sam’s first practice, the *Post-Dispatch* reported, “Sam appeared to be in good shape, usually leading his group” (Thomas, 2014k, para. 8).

Mainstream outlets were relatively quiet on Sam’s summer chances until Rams summer camp returned in late July. As camp commenced, the *Post-Dispatch* said Sam was performing well: “[H]e flashed some of the moves that helped him earn co-defensive player of the year honors in the SEC a year ago” (Lyons, 2014b, para. 15). The *ESPN* Rams beat had similarly positive assessments: “[T]here were some good things to discuss as Sam flashed some of the pass-rush ability that afforded him so much success at Missouri” (Wagoner, 2014l, para. 3). A day later, the beat sourced Rams special teams coordinator John Fassel, who said he was happy with Sam’s progress, such as Sam’s weight loss, which made him faster (Wagoner, 2014m). *ESPN* continued to report Sam was having “some strong practices” and had become “a staple of most special-teams drills” (Wagoner, 2014n, para. 7-11). Yet, the outlet highlighted how fellow rookie defensive end Ethan Westbrooks was likely fighting for the same roster spot as Sam (Wagoner, 2014o). The Division II college athlete from West Texas A&M had gone “undrafted in May because of discipline problems” (Wagoner, 2014o, para. 7), offering his own potential distractions, though this was not discussed in coverage.

Queer media were limited in their coverage of Sam’s practices. Most practice coverage came from local Rams beat reporters, indicating the importance of having on-the-ground
journalists for such reports. *Outsports* did pick up some of these reports, such as the assessment from Coach Fassel; the outlet declared that Sam was “turning heads as special teams player” (Zeigler, 2014bb).

Advocacy organizations were quiet about Sam’s fit and skill during June and July, not actively partaking in the conversation on these topics.

**From ESPY to distraction**

Sam was again at the center of attention in July. In addition to the start of summer camp, Sam received one of his greatest honors to date: an *ESPY* award for courage. Yet, just days later, the distraction debate obtained national attention after a former coach – Tony Dungy – told a local news outlet he would not have drafted Sam. The story again demonstrated a rippling flow of information that resulted in several cycles of media coverage. This section will examine these starkly different stories that occurred within the same week.

**The ESPY.** Every July, *ESPN* hosts the *ESPY*s, an annual awards program that honors athletes in many categories, including the Arthur Ashe Courage Award. *ESPN* announced in May that Sam would receive the Ashe award for his public actions (ESPN.com News, 2014j). The event was broadcast on *ESPN* in primetime on July 16th. Sam gave an emotional speech and offered words of support to queer youth (Brinson, 2014). The event was created by – and distributed on – mainstream media, but it was queer media and advocacy organizations that heavily promoted Sam’s award.

**The ESPY: Queer media.** Queer media promoted the event in advance of its airing. Prior to the ceremony, *Outsports* wondered who would present Sam with his award (Zeigler, 2014cc). Cyd Zeigler indicated how mainstream media reached out to him for advice, stating, “A
couple months ago a producer at ESPN asked me who should present Sam with the award” (para. 2). In an example of an ironic twist that week, Zeigler suggested Tony Dungy (para. 4). Following the ceremony, Sam’s emotional acceptance speech was widely covered by queer outlets. *Outsports* commended *ESPN* for its acceptance of Sam: “ESPN, the worldwide leader in sports, was dedicated and proud to tell that story of a gay man and acknowledge the role Michael has played in shifting our culture with his bravery” (Zeigler, 2014dd, para. 3). Zeigler’s awards write-up was also posted – in its entirety in a guest column – on *The Huffington Post* (2014ee), offering an example of how queer media voices were shared by larger platforms. In the column, Zeigler promoted the importance of Sam’s story:

I’ve disagreed with Michael on just one thing since I met him six months ago. He has said all along that he’s just a football player. He’s not. Michael Sam represents the hopes and dreams of that entire class of people who have been waiting for someone to set them free from our society's last closet. When history looks back, it will look back at Michael Sam, a deeply courageous man who changed the face of professional sports. Forever (2014dd, para. 10).

*Outsports* also shared an *ESPN* short film about Sam that was made for the event (Zeigler, 2014ff). *Queerty* promoted the event, saying “[t]here wasn’t a dry eye in the house…” (Tharrett, 2014f, para. 1)

While news coverage was positive, an *Outsports* article addressed negative feedback of the event that occurred on social media in an article: “Twitter haters out in force for Michael Sam’s ESPY” (Buzinski, 2014l). *Outsports* shared the negative tweets, such as: “It’s sickening that Michael Sam has his own segment because he is gay. The espy’s are for sports not faggots” (para. 4), as well as: “#MichaelSam is a FAG! A fag disgrace to America! Normal men should quit football in protest! I couldn’t be around him in the locker room!” (para. 6).

*Outsports*’ piece was therefore primarily based on audience-generated tweets, feedback that was in response to a mainstream media event.
The ESPY: Advocacy organizations. Advocacy organizations also heavily promoted the pro-Sam coverage. The Human Rights Campaign shared ESPN video of the speech on its blog (Suh, 2014) and linked to it from its Twitter feed (Human, 2014m). The HRC called Sam a “role model for young LGBT athletes and fans,” consistent with its ongoing youth initiatives (Suh, 2014, para. 3). GLAAD wrote a blog post about the event (Katz, 2014) that it then shared on its Facebook page (GLAAD, 2014x); the blog post included video of the affair via Youtube. The Facebook post obtained over 3,000 likes. Athlete Ally retweeted the ESPY twitter handle (2014kk), as well as comments from Michael Sam’s personal Twitter feed (2014ll). Advocacy organizations thus continued to promote pro-queer content from other outlets.

The ESPYs served as an example of how a mainstream media event was well shared by queer media and advocacy organizations. The event also created highly visible backlash on social media, resulting in responsive commentary from queer outlets.

The Tony Dungy incident

Tony Dungy: Mainstream news. The ESPY positivity was short lived. On July 20th, the Tampa Tribune published an article – “NFL holding players to higher standard” – that discussed NFL player issues (Kaufman, 2014). The article’s first source was Tony Dungy, who stated, “I wouldn’t have taken him. Not because I don’t believe Michael Sam should have a chance to play, but I wouldn’t want to deal with all of it. It’s not going to be totally smooth … things will happen” (para. 5-6). The local article was well shared by audiences, obtaining over 3,700 shares on Twitter. Dungy’s comments to the local paper quickly made national headlines.

ESPN picked up the story within a day, its headline: “Dungy would not have selected Sam” (Wells, 2014c). The short article offered little commentary beyond sharing the quotes of
Dungy and Indianapolis Colts staff, the team for which Dungy had last coached. Yet, opinionated ESPN columns were quickly written, gaining much more audience attention. One of ESPN’s more pro-Sam voices, Dan Graziano, wrote a column – “Dungy’s comments better left unsaid” – that obtained thousands of audience shares (2014f). Graziano took Dungy to task:

Dungy's words -- and the fact that it was someone as respected as he is who said them -- serve to legitimize one of the excuses teams might have had, and might still have, for not employing an openly gay player (para. 2).

Graziano chided Dungy for using the distraction argument as justification, serving as one of the mainstream voices to argue the distraction frame was cover for homophobia:

Yet, the "distraction" myth persists, and the reason it does is because it's an easy way for power brokers to justify personnel decisions they might want to make for other reasons. … In Sam's case, the silliness carries the stench of bigotry and really has no justification. Michael Sam has not been a distraction to the Rams, who have a good, experienced coaching staff that is managing whatever needs to be managed just fine (para. 8-11).

While Graziano attacked the distraction frame, influential columnist Jason Whitlock introduced a hypocrisy frame into the discussion (2014c). Although Whitlock had strongly shaped coverage about the Oprah Winfrey series by criticizing Sam, Whitlock now supported Sam in another widely read column: “Dungy wrong about Michael Sam” (2014c). Whitlock referenced Dungy’s previous work with troubled athlete Michael Vick to cry foul:

Dungy's inconsistency in logic as it relates to Michael Sam and Michael Vick is baffling. Dungy championed Vick’s re-entry into the NFL from prison. According to published reports at the time, Dungy even supported Vick's decision to do a reality TV show on BET…(para. 5-6).

Whitlock argued Sam’s skill had other societal values: “Is Sam, a marginal NFL talent, worth the trouble, the distractions? When you consider his NFL career might stop one child from contemplating suicide because his/her sexuality is outside the norm, then hell yes, Sam is worth it” (para. 19). Whitlock’s commentary spread because he was featured on many of the network’s programs – including television (Olbermann, 2014). His comments showed how a story such as Dungy’s developed into broader frames, such as to LGBT youth and the importance of sport.
These findings complemented the Oprah Winfrey story as the OWN series was a catalyst for many anti-Sam frames. In this instance, the same practice was used against Dungy.

With the Dungy comments as the spark, other mainstream writers began to attack the distraction frame. ESPN beat writer Nick Wagoner argued Sam was fitting in with the team and that “the word ‘distraction’ has become something of a catchall buzzword as a means for avoiding details, Sam seems to have a good handle on the only focus he should have at this time of year: making the Rams’ roster” (2014p, para. 6).

While the Dungy story was breaking, Michael Sam happened to have one of his team-allotted post-workout interviews with reporters. Sam responded simply and with a laugh, “Thank God he wasn’t the St. Louis Rams’ coach” (Wagoner, 2014p, para. 4). Sam’s response quickly became part of the narrative. The Rams’ Artis Twyman said sometimes – as with the draft – moments are serendipitously timed (personal communication, March 6, 2015). Twyman said, “it just so happened that we had Michael scheduled to talk” the day after Dungy’s comments. Reporters were thus ready to ask Sam about Dungy’s comments. Twyman discussed how, from a media relations perspective, one of his jobs is to prep all players to work with the media:

[I]f something’s in the news, I kinda try and talk and say, “Hey, listen, this is what they’re saying, these are some things, these are some ways we can handle,” then we kinda go back and for with it like that. Ya know, just try to be sure that they’re comfortable with their answers and kinda give them the best way to deal with it. A lot of the times, and what I tell a lot of people is that, only because the person is a professional athlete or they excelled at this or that doesn’t mean that they know how to deal with the media, ya know what I mean? (personal communication, March 6, 2015).

These findings demonstrated how fortunate timing – coupled with the help of professional communication staff – created a moment for Sam to shape coverage. The Post-Dispatch was complimentary: “Sam brushes off Dungy remarks” (Thomas, 2014n). From a Rams perspective, the Dungy incident also meant that Rams coach Jeff Fisher again had a voice to express a key point about Sam. Fisher went on ESPN radio, and his comments were placed in

Finally, while the Rams used the Dungy remarks to definitively say that Sam was not a distraction, *ESPN’s SportNation* posted an audience poll (SportsNation, 2014). The poll asked, “Will Michael Sam be a distraction for the Rams this season?” With over 56,000 votes, 82% of readers said Sam would either be a “major” or “minor” distraction, demonstrating apparent disconnect between audience opinion, media commentaries, and the St. Louis Rams’ on-the-ground realities.

**Tony Dungy: Queer media.** Queer media actively turned attention to the Dungy comments. *Outsports* responded with a bold headline: “Tony Dungy: Yep, I’m still a homophobe” (Zeigler, 2014gg). Like Graziano, *Outsports* continued to equate use of the distraction frame as cover for homophobia: “Dungy couches his homophobia here in a concern for his team and the dreaded ‘distraction’” (para. 5). *Outsports’* audience appreciated mainstream criticism of Dungy, and findings again indicated audience interactions with many outlets:

Nice to see media types finally taking him to task. He was Olbermann’s ‘Worst Person’ last nite and there was a nice piece on Yahoo Sports raking him over the coals. When he was doing his anti-gay fundraising almost nobody (except for Outsports) said boo (Audience, 2014kkk).

Dungy responded to the national firestorm by issuing a statement to explain his remarks. *Outsports* summarized Dungy’s response this way: “Tony Dungy blames Oprah for his comments on drafting Michael Sam” (Zeigler, 2014hh). *Outsports* posted much of Dungy’s statement and linked audiences to *Pro Football Talk* to read it in its entirety (Zeigler, 2014hh). Dungy’s statement argued that these very media attacks on him validated the quotes he made to the *Tribune*: “I do, however, believe that the media attention that comes with it will be a distraction. Unfortunately we are all seeing this play out now, and I feel badly that my remarks played a role in the distraction” (para. 8).
Outsports published multiple articles that day criticizing Dungy’s comments, indicating the level of coverage by queer media. One article – “Tony Dungy said he disagreed with ‘Jason Collins’s lifestyle’ just last year” – was based on Twitter remarks Dungy made in response to a tweet directed at him by a local writer (Zeigler, 2014ii). Reporter Brad Wells had tweeted at Dungy: “It’s extremely important that @TonyDungy offer his opinions re: Collins. Hopefully, his views have evolved since 2007” (para. 3). Dungy responded on Twitter, “I don’t agree with Jason Collins’ lifestyle but think he deserves respect and should have opportunities like anyone else” (para. 4). In summary, a question from a local reporter, made public on Twitter, which then caused a public reaction on Twitter, resulted in coverage a year later to shape another story.

Another Outsports article used the comments to argue a broader theme: “Tony Dungy is not in the NFL minority with views on Michael Sam” (Buzinski, 2014m). The piece shared an argument made by a local Indianapolis Star columnist who also attacked the distraction frame:

Dungy talks about the distraction, how things could possibly go awry with a gay player in the locker room, but I tend to think this has less to do with distractions and everything to do with his personal disapproval of Sam’s sexuality (Kravitz, 2014).

Queer media therefore promoted mainstream coverage that aligned with queer media’s point of view. Like mainstream coverage, Outsports focused on the Dungy-as-a-hypocrite frame. Yet, Outsports broadened the double-standard argument to also criticize mainstream media’s treatment of Sam: “The whole thing also points to the underbelly of homophobia in the sports media. Vick can have a reality show, but if Sam dares to it’s a ‘distraction’ and he must be cut from the Rams roster immediately. Sad” (Zeigler, 2014jj, para. 9). Finally, Outsports also drew attention to what the outlet called Sam’s “perfect response to Tony Dungy,” linking to video of the comments that were captured by ESPN (Zeigler, 2014kk). Outsports summarized: “For his part, Sam has been nothing but gracious in his response to Dungy… (2014b, para. 1).
**Tony Dungy: Queer advocacy groups.** Queer advocacy groups were also highly involved in the Dungy story. The HRC wrote two blog pieces about Dungy’s comments, linking to the *Tribune* article (Joughin, 2014a; Joughin, 2014b). Speaking to its focus on employment discrimination, the HRC commented, “Essentially Dungy is saying it would have been too much work as a coach to make sure there weren’t any negative issues surrounding having an openly gay player on his team” (Joughin, 2014a, para. 5). The HRC also claimed Dungy’s remarks harmed LGBT youth, citing a study about LGBT youth being less likely to participate in sports as an example (para. 6).

Athlete Ally got involved by sharing a blog post (Ayanbadejo, 2014a) on Facebook (Athlete, 2014mm) and Twitter (Athlete, 2014nn). The blog was written by straight allied athlete Brendon Ayanbadejo to offer third-party credibility, consistent with Ally’s often-used practice. The blog actually quoted snippets of a piece Ayanbadejo had originally written for *Fox Sports* (2014b). Ayanbadejo focused on the Dungy-as-a-hypocrite frame: “Dungy has selective reasoning when it comes to what is a distraction” (Ayanbadejo, 2014a). The column served as another example of how advocacy organizations sometimes had fully fledged columns distributed by mainstream outlets.

**In summary: Tony Dungy.** The Dungy story developed from local coverage into a national story by flowing through mainstream and queer news outlets, as well as through advocacy and audience media platforms. Influential columns by writers such as Jason Whitlock once again obtained far more attention than many fact-based news stories. Queer advocacy organizations continued to use differing communication tactics in responding to the story while mainstream audiences still demonstrated opinions that often diverged from the coverage they
were reading. Finally, queer audiences again indicated that they obtained information about Sam from a wide array of outlets.

**A note on David Tyree: a behind-the-scenes situation that influenced coverage of Sam**

A similar event was causing a stir that week, though coverage was overshadowed by Dungy. On July 22nd, *ESPN* reported that the New York Giants had hired former player David Tyree as its “director of player development” (Graziano, 2014g). *ESPN* noted that Tyree, like Dungy, had a history of negative comments toward LGBT individuals, as writer Dan Graziano reported that, “Tyree said he’d trade his miracle ‘helmet catch,’ which led to the Giants winning Super Bowl XLII, in exchange for a law outlawing gay marriage” (2014h, para. 2). In arguing against the hiring decision, *ESPN* mentioned that the Human Rights Campaign had spoken out against the employment move (Graziano, 2014h, para. 3). *Outsports* responded with a letter from “A gay Christian athlete…,” similar to its approach of a letter from a gay coach to Dungy (Sanders, J., 2014). While Dungy offered a defensive statement in response to the criticism, Tyree demonstrated a different type of relationship during a media relations crisis. *Outsports*’ Cyd Zeigler reported he had a conversation with Tyree, noting, “Tyree called me to talk on the phone this weekend” (2014ll, para. 1). *Outsports*’ headline assessment read: “After speaking with David Tyree, I’m convinced he doesn’t support gay conversion therapy and the Gaints aren’t anti-gay” (Zeigler, 2014ll). Dungy and Tyree’s differing media relations approaches demonstrated how relationships or behind-the-scenes interactions shaped coverage in ways beyond mere press releases or statements.

Speaking to these behind-the-scenes interactions, Wade Davis used the Tyree situation as an example of how he, even as an advocate himself, sometimes has “to go against the quote,
unquote, LGBT world or the community and say, ‘Hey, you know, like back off, this is an opportunity, and the opportunity is not to bash … this person’” (personal communication, March 29, 2015). Davis argued that knowledge of communities and cultures is critical to bring change, noting that if an athlete gets attacked by media or advocacy groups or fined by the league, “the rest of the guys in the locker room will close in ranks, because it is a family, it is a community, and they will protect each other more often than right or wrong” (personal communication, March 29, 2015). Therefore, when considering issues of access, Davis described how trust is crucial. He said the league appreciates his work because he understands what it’s like to be a player. Davis said that when situations such as homophobic player remarks occur, “90% of the time” both the league and the team jointly request to bring him in to help educate him on the situation. From there, he’s been able to build “up enough social capital with both [the league and the LGBT community] that they give me a pass for a little while” to facilitate the relationship (W. Davis, personal communication, March 29, 2015). Davis’s comments highlight how factors such as trust and knowledge of a community and culture affect situations behind-the-scenes, in turn shaping media coverage.

Athlete Ally reported a similar strategy, noting that when homophobic remarks occur and it’s asked for comment, the organization takes a “softer approach of sort of saying how very unfortunate of these comments. I hope this is an opportunity for learning and growth” (H. Taylor, personal communication, March 11, 2015). Much like Davis’s work, Ally focuses heavily on behind-the-scenes training with the league, meaning it must help educate the league while also maintaining access, akin to an organizational media relations process with journalists. Taylor described this “softer approach” as:

a bit of a tactic, in like saying now look, there’s always going to be a time when these teams or leagues are going to say, “Yes, we need training, yes we need to be better equip our athletes from a messaging standpoint. And, if from an organization, we are calling for people’s heads and being really divisive in our
messaging, that in some way closes doors for us to kinda walk that line a little bit by saying what we need to say but how do we do it without alienating some of our potential audience (personal communication, March 11, 2015).

August: Sam’s last impression

By August, it was time for Michael Sam’s preseason audition. Sam had four exhibition games in which to perform. By the end of the month, his NFL fate would be decided. This section will analyze how mainstream news, queer media, and advocacy organizations described his August progress.

August: Sam’s last impression: Mainstream media. Before Sam’s first game on August 8th, the Post-Dispatch noted the media attention:

The contest has attracted more national media than usual for an exhibition opener in St. Louis, but nothing that would qualify for the coveted ‘media circus’ moniker. USA Today, ESPN, Yahoo, Outsports and NFL Network will have correspondents on hand for the contest…(Thomas, 2014o, para. 8-9).

Following the game, the Post-Dispatch noted the crowd’s positive reaction when Sam made plays (Burwell, 2014c). Columnist Bryan Burwell called the game “a low-key but solid step for Sam” but suggested that other team scouts found Sam “impressive” (2014c, para. 21). Burwell used his column to argue against many of the national frames applied to the athlete: “He wasn’t a symbol of social progress, he was a rookie trying to prove his worth. He wasn’t a distraction, he was an excitable defensive lineman flying all over the football field trying to make a play” (para. 4). Speaking to the existence of different agendas, Burwell said local audiences did not have the same take as the national media obsession:

The small crowd in the Dome wasn’t all that interested in the greater sense of the historic story of the evening, because here in St. Louis the Michael Sam story is not quite the same as it is everywhere else. (para. 9).

Offering an example, Burwell continued to source Cyd Zeigler, who said, “Everywhere else in the country, they’re watching this game because of Michael” (para. 12).
ESPN assessment was similarly positive: “Sam had some good moments...” (Wagoner, 2014q, para. 5). Sam obtained his first NFL sack in his second preseason game (Wagoner, 2014r). ESPN reported that Sam and Ethan Westbrooks were likely in competition for the same spot, but that Sam’s performances were “doing enough to stay in the picture” (Wagoner, 2014r, para. 7).

Though Sam was now playing in games and the Rams had definitively stated he was not a distraction, mainstream outlets nonetheless still kept the frame alive. Sports Illustrated’s Peter King reported from Rams camp what had long been shared by local outlets: “Sam is not a distraction of any sort” (2014c, para. 14). The ESPN Rams page again addressed the issue, arguing:

All that talk about defensive end Michael Sam being a distraction for this team has been just that: talk. Sam has earned nothing but positive reviews from his teammates and coaches for his work ethic and desire to improve. He still faces a battle to make the roster, but aside from a couple days of increased media attention, the circus many expected has never materialized (Wagoner, 2014s, para. 14).

In Sam’s third preseason game, the quarterback rusher faced Johnny Manziel, the other most-covered rookie of the summer. Would Sam get a sack? Sure enough, as the Post-Dispatch put it, “Then came the moment we’ve all been waiting for: Rams defensive end Michael Sam sacked Johnny Football. Sam celebrated by mimicking Manziel’s ‘Money’ gesture. Talk about your ESPN moments” (Thomas, 2014p, para. 24). As the Post-Dispatch predicted, ESPN’s NFL page led with this element of the game, its headline: “Michael Sam mocks Johnny Manziel” (ESPN.com News, 2014l). Illustrating audience awareness of news coverage patterns, one reader said ESPN’s headline was predictable: “The sad part is I knew there would be an article written about this. I’m also expecting a 30 for 30 and sports science breakdown on the sack” (Audience, 2014iii). Yet, as the article obtained over 12,000-plus Facebook shares, overall audience interest seemed to justify ESPN’s coverage (ESPN.com News, 2014l). Sam supporters argued his
preseason performance showed he was better than his draft value: “How about focusing on the fact, that Sam has been playing better than a 7th rd draft pick” (Audience, 2014mmm). Based on Sam’s preseason, the ESPN Rams beat strengthened its predictions of Sam’s chances, writing, “Sam continues building case for roster spot” (Wagoner, 2014t).

The reaction to Sam’s sack of Johnny Manziel is another example of how discussion flowed across multiple media platforms with indications that media outlets were following audiences as much as audiences were following media outlets. Based on the volume of social media chatter, ESPN noted, “Defensive end Chris Long even joked about the internet breaking because of” the sack (Wagoner, 2014t, para. 4). The ESPN Browns beat also responded: “How Twitter survived it might make for an episode of ‘Unsolved Mysteries.’” (Trotter, 2014, para. 2).

August: Sam’s last impression: Queer media and advocacy organizations. Queer media were also quite active in covering Sam’s preseason performance. Outsports covered Sam’s first game with much fanfare, posting multiple times on game day. To demonstrate how it was just another preseason football game without gay “distractions,” this included a photo report of the mostly “empty stadium” (Zeigler, 2014mm) and a separate piece that announced there were “[n]o rainbow flags, no twinks. Feels an awful lot like a football game around here” (Zeigler, 2014nn, para. 1). Like mainstream outlets, Outsports reported there was “[n]o media circus” present (Zeigler, 2014oo). Zeigler – who attended the game – noted how local journalists had told him that the national media attention did not match the local reality: “Even when Tony Dungy said he wouldn’t have drafted Michael Sam, it was a blip here in St. Louis” (2014oo, para. 4). Zeigler continued: “For Sam, for St. Louis, this was just another football game: No one was thinking much about Sam being different from anyone else in blue and gold” (2014pp, para.
Again, this demonstrated how national media had been operating within their own agenda, one quite different from local realities.

Similar to mainstream outlets, Zeigler complimented Sam’s performance: “What Sam wasn’t Friday night was ‘slow,’ ‘undersized’ or ‘overmatched’ – some of the buzz words the ‘experts’ used to explain away the late round he was selected in the NFL Draft” (2014pp, para. 17). Despite the game day similarities between mainstream and queer outlets, Zeigler did offer these words upon Sam’s stepping onto the field: “No gay kid in America will ever live with the idea that he can’t be true and open about himself and not have a shot at the NFL” (2014qq, para. 5). The outlet also used the game to – in a tongue-in-cheek manner – combat the distraction frame, a headline reading: “Saints fall under Michael Sam’s ‘distracting’ spell as rookie earns respect in Game 1” (Zeigler, 2014pp).

Outsports continued to document Sam’s progress throughout the preseason. Days before the Manziel game, Outsports – like mainstream audiences – demonstrated predictive abilities in how ESPN would cover the game: “If Michael Sam sacks Johnny Manziel on Saturday, ESPN will have an orgasm” (Buzinski, 2014n).

Queerty was relatively quiet in its coverage of Sam during the preseason. While not covering Sam’s athletic performance, Queerty did have a piece announcing that “Sam is behaving just like straight NFL stars,” referring to his talking in the third person in interviews (Queerty, 2014c). The article went on to comment that Sam kissed partners, merchandised, got endorsement deals, attempted a reality television show, hired a publicist, was dating someone attractive, shared selfies, and was featured on TMZ, making him just like straight players. While the article was tongue-in-cheek, the outlet took credit for its own role in circulating social media photos of Sam and Cammisano (para. 29).
Advocacy organizations were relatively quiet during Sam’s preseason, though Athlete Ally promoted Sam’s first game on Twitter, forwarding readers to coverage in SB Nation (2014oo). Ally also posted about Sam’s first sack on Facebook and Twitter, linking to coverage in NFL.com (2014pp; 2014qq). The organization attempted to get readers involved in the sack, asking them to “like” or “retweet” if they thought Sam would “have another this weekend” (2014pp; 2014qq).

In August, Sam’s preseason performance was considered strong – though not overwhelmingly so – by all outlets.

The shower story

By the end of August, attention turned to team announcements about which players would be cut. Just days before the Rams would make a decision on Sam, his showering habits became a national story. As mainstream media had predicted, Sam’s locker room behavior was a distraction that obtained national attention. Yet, it was a self-fulfilling prophecy as mainstream media created the distraction. Like the Oprah Winfrey affair – to best demonstrate the changing and reacting flows of the story – description of this case will be combined into a unified chronological thread.

On August 26th, ESPN aired a piece discussing Sam’s showering experiences in the Rams locker room (Ley, 2014b). The report came from Josina Anderson, the same journalist who earlier in the summer used a single anonymous teammate to report on the team’s perceptions of Sam. Outsports jumped on the story within hours, its headline: “Josina Anderson of ESPN feels the need to report on Michael Sam in the shower” (Zeigler, 2014rr). Outsports was highly critical: “Anderson reduces Sam to a side show who has to tiptoe around the showers. Pathetic”
ESPN directly responded to Outsports’ complaints by sending the queer outlet the following: “In response to recent questions about Sam fitting in with the team, the Rams brought up the shower topic and we relayed that information as part of our reporting” (Zeigler, 2014rr, para. 1). ESPN’s initial response was thus arguably matter-of-fact and unapologetic.

Queerty also quickly posted about the story, linking to a YouTube video of the report that obtained over 600,000 views (Tracer, 2014d; CorkGaines, 2014). Queerty readers were critical of the coverage: “I am beginning to believe that there is a conspiracy to run this kid out of football before he begins” (Audience, 2014nnn).

Negative response to the story quickly built after a Rams player – Chris Long – used Twitter to lambast the coverage: “Dear ESPN, Everyone but you is over it” (2014). The tweet built audience support of an anti-ESPN frame on its own, obtaining over 15,000 retweets and over 13,000 likes. The tweet also became the base for reactive media coverage as outlets such as Outsports adopted it in coverage (Zeigler, 2014ss).

LGBT advocacy organizations also got involved. GLAAD – whose focus is media portrayal of LGBT people – covered the story on its blog (Murray, 2014c) and shared the post further on Twitter (2014y) and Facebook (2014z). GLAAD demonstrated its role within the gay-rights movement, reporting it had “been in communication with ESPN to emphasize the serious harms of stereotypes and the company’s responsibility to do better” (Murray, 2014c, para. 5).

By the 27th, anti-ESPN feedback continued to grow. Outsports – citing a Post-Dispatch report – stated Rams coach Jeff Fisher was “furious” about the coverage (Buzinski, 2014o). In an interview with the Post-Dispatch, Fisher called the journalism “unethical” and said he thought it was “very, very unprofessional” (Thomas, 2014q, para. 3). Beyond the story’s topic, Fisher
was angry about “the manner in which [Anderson] did it” (Thomas, 2014q, para. 3). He continued,

Obviously she came in, in all likelihood to see if there was gonna be a roster move at the 75 cutdown as it relates to Mike Sam. That didn’t happen. But she needed to do something, and it’s my understanding that she manufactured this story (Thomas, 2014q, para. 9).

The quote highlighted how news processes – such as access and a need for a story – may have led to the coverage. Additionally, a local media reporter was able to obtain access to a response from the Rams coach, the interview then shaping broader national coverage.

Behind-the-scenes relationships continued to shape coverage, as the Post-Dispatch reported an executive from ESPN had called the Rams to apologize (Thomas, 2014q, para. 5), a change in tone from the network’s initial retort. Following the negative reactions, ESPN also apologized publicly, distributing remorse via the Twitter handle of one of its public relations professionals (Krulewitz, 2014a). The tweet read: “On Tuesday’s Michael Sam report: ‘ESPN regrets the manner in which we presented our report. Clearly yesterday we collectively failed to meet the standards we have set in reporting on LGBT-related topics in sports’” (Krulewitz, 2014b). As the statement was too long for a tweet, a shortened tweet (Krulewitz, 2014a) linked to the full text, which was available on TwitLonger, a service that allows a venue to post longer tweets (Krulewitz, 2014b).

The apology obtained significant attention. It was shared in a GLAAD blog post (Murray, 2014c), as well as in an organizational tweet (GLAAD, 2014y) and Facebook post (GLAAD, 2014z). While the organization criticized the network’s coverage, GLAAD took the opportunity to credit ESPN for showing the kiss of Michael Sam (Murray, 2014c, para. 6). It thus appeared that GLAAD was promoting its ability to discuss coverage with a mainstream outlet while also defending that outlet by highlighting previous pro-queer footage. The HRC also shared a tweet of ESPN’s apology (Human, 2014n).
Outsports carried the apology, explaining why homophobia brought it about: “The whole shower issue has been the most consistent stereotype associated with openly gay male athletes, implying that they would become crazed sex fiends once they see a teammate naked” (Buzinski, 2014o, para. 9). The Outsports argument illustrated how the notion of a gay athlete’s showering habits had long been a topic of interest. In fact, at the outset of Sam’s public coming out, Outsports released a piece – “Gay football player reveals what showering with teammates is really like” – that chronicled how a sports shower is a nasty place where athletes go to get clean, hardly inducing any type of sexual thought (Cooper, 2014).

As late as mid-July, Outsports wrote another piece on showering: “Michael Sam won’t have any problems in the shower” (Buzinski, 2014p). That article reacted to a feature article in ESPN Magazine: “Nothing to see here (A History of Showering in sports)” (Fleming, 2014). Thus, ESPN had already featured an entire article on showering dynamics. The July ESPN article – written by David Fleming – heavily quoted openly gay athlete Scott Cooper, the writer of the February Outsports column (2014, para. 13-21). The Fleming article described Sam’s hypothetical arrival to the shower after a June 3rd practice: “Then he arrived at a pattern of tiny gray-and-blue linoleum tile, thereby breaking the ultimate taboo in men’s team sports: an openly gay man showering with his NFL teammates” (para. 1). The article described the shower’s unique place in the locker room, as well as a description that “everyone’s looking” at each other because men are men (para. 4). ESPN cited Wade Davis who described how he “break(s) the ice” when doing league trainings:

‘Let’s just stop with this idea that ‘Oh, gay guys are looking at everyone’s penises,’ because you straight guys – admit it – you all know you’re looking too,’ he tells his audience. This is invariably followed by tense moments of silence and sideways glances until the room busts out in the laughter (para. 7).

The piece quoted Davis’s arguments that gay players view their teammates as family, meaning that “[t]hey’re not going to be attracted to their brothers,” just as straight players would not be
attracted to their female family members (para. 14). The *ESPN* article ended by saying Rams players reacted to showering with Sam with a “collective yawn” (para. 15) – in direct contrast from the Anderson report a month later.

**In summary: the shower story.** The shower story demonstrated how an issue created by a single media report – again based on anonymous quotes – developed into days of coverage. Many unique factors shaped the flow of the responsive cycles. Though *ESPN* did not initially apologize, the network eventually changed its tune, apparently in response to media and organizational feedback. To apologize, the outlet issued a statement on a platform (Twitlonger) that facilitates another platform (Twitter). While the shower story “broke” in August, it was arguably covered because it was a salient topic throughout the year. The story created distraction just days before teams decided which players to cut.

**A queer end to the summer**

While the shower story was the last topic to receive great attention before Sam’s decision day with the Rams, it is worth discussing two other topics that got play in queer media during August: 1) pro-Sam celebrities, and 2) the coming out of another college football player.

**Supportive Celebrities.** Barely covered in mainstream news but often discussed in queer press and by advocacy organizations were Sam’s celebrity endorsers. This included August comments by actor Daniel Radcliffe and One Direction band member Harry Styles.

In early August, Radcliffe made comments about those who were speaking ill of Sam. In an interview with *Out Magazine*, Radcliffe said it was “horrendous” that Sam had fallen so low in the draft (Osenlund, 2014, para. 19). He said,

*People can say whatever they like about his athleticism, or not fitting the bill for certain conditions or whatever, but the fact is no player in the last six years to win that award has been drafted lower than 16th overall, I think* (para. 19).
Then he spoke to Sam’s detractors: “My favorite comments online were the ones that said, ‘I don’t mind him being gay, but I don’t want to see him kiss his boyfriend’” (para. 20). Radcliffe’s comments to *Out* were further shared by *Queerty* (2014d), as well as GLAAD (Dera, 2014b). In this instance, a celebrity acted as a third-party opinion leader by promoting a certain frame – Sam’s athletic awards from the SEC. The celebrity also responded to comments witnessed on audience platforms. These actions led to his comments, statements that obtained news coverage that led to other news coverage and advocacy organization sharing.

Harry Styles also obtained news coverage for his pro-Sam statement. At a concert in St. Louis, Styles – at one point – donned a Michael Sam jersey (Queerty, 2014e). Advocacy organization Do Something posted a photo of Styles in the jersey on its Facebook page (Do, 2014). With over 1,500,000 Facebook followers, Do Something had a large media voice. GLAAD further shared Do Something’s image, blogging (Davis, 2014b), tweeting (GLAAD, 2014aa), and posting the photo on Facebook (GLAAD, 2014bb). Demonstrating audience interest in a celebrity’s actions, GLAAD’s Facebook post received over 4,400 likes. The Styles story was also covered by *Queerty*, which picked up the story from *TMZ* (Queerty, 2014e). While the story did not generate mainstream coverage in outlets like *ESPN* or the *NYT*, *Queerty* noted the moment’s importance: Sam “is receiving some great support from voices that are easily way more influential with a younger generation” (2014e, para. 1). Sam also used his Twitter account to tweet at Harry Styles to thank him, Sam’s tweet alone garnering over 8,000 retweets (Sam, 2014a). The St. Louis Rams handle also tweeted the photo, its message being shared over 800 times (St., 2014b).
Akin to Ellen DeGeneres’s influence earlier in the year, these instances once again demonstrated how celebrity comments obtained much audience attention and engagement, even if the stories did not cross over into ESPN or NYT coverage.

**Agenda building of a queer sports story.** Another story made its way across queer-supportive channels at this time – the public coming out of another Division I college football player. Arizona State player Chip Sarafin came out to a local gay sports outlet (Wyrick, 2014) and quickly obtained national news, especially in queer outlets. *Outsports’* explanation of how the story built illustrated the workings of the hybrid media system:

How Sarafin became known publicly is a study of how news travels these days. The story was broken by Compete magazine, a Phoenix-based print magazine with a small online presence. Their profile of Sarafin was in their August issue, which was available five days ago. The magazine on its Twitter feed highlighted their cover man this month, YouTube gay fitness personality Davey Wavey. Sarafin was not even mentioned in their Twitter promo. On Wednesday, the gay website Queerty ran an item on Sarafin, which was noticed by Joe Guckin, a Philadelphia blogger and Outsports reader and contributor since 2000. I was in Cleveland watching beach volleyball when I happened to read my Twitter feed and saw Joe's tweet. When I got back to the hotel, I checked Google News expecting to see how many links there were to the story, but only the Queerty story appeared. I wrote a short article highlighting the news with some quotes from the Compete article and after verifying Sarafin's playing status with Arizona State. I tweeted it out and placed it on Facebook, thinking it was a nice story but not stop-the-presses news. Sarafin has never appeared in a game and might never see the field, so I assumed many people wouldn't care. Compete smartly focused on what an amazing student he is, highlighting his research into making football helmets safer and his desire to be a neurologist. His being gay appeared to be no big deal to him and the magazine played it that way. Anyone checking his Facebook page any time in the past year would see he was a member of the Phoenix Gaymers board game group, so Sarafin was anything but closeted. I was stunned to check our real time Outsports stats 30 minutes after posting to see 20 times the normal amount of users on the site. Our story has received 364 retweets and 2,564 Facebook shares to date, and the mainstream media kicked into gear. Outsports had become the catalyst that set off hundreds of stories, including on the evening news and a three-minute segment on ESPN. Google News went from having one link to his story to hundreds from sports and non-sports sites. When an athlete who has never played a down gets such notoriety, it tells how big this story is still perceived to be. In addition, young gay male athletes are still thirsting for role models in their sport. Sam inspired Sarafin to come out and maybe the Sun Devil will do the same to others (Buzinski, 2014q, para. 5-10).

A GLAAD (Davis, 2014c) and Human Rights Campaign (Miller, H., 2014b) blog post, as well as an *Associated Press* article (2014c), also picked up the story. Much of this coverage also shared a tweet Michael Sam made toward Sarafin (2014b), congratulating him on coming out. *Outsports’* thorough description above explained how a local queer sports story developed into national news. This discussion involved many different players and platforms: audience members who
had an interest in the story and shared it, journalists who picked up the story through the use of reader social media accounts, an entertainment-like queer website (Queerty), and the use of a search engine and news aggregator (Google).

Chapter VIII conclusion

This chapter’s findings further illustrated the individuals, platforms, and salient frames that affected story flow. The Winfrey and Dungy stories demonstrated how influential columnists or players quickly reshaped a story’s narrative. These stories also showed how salient frames pop when given a catalytic moment. The flow of the Chip Sarafin story brought many of this study’s findings together into a succinct example by demonstrating how a localized queer media story used multiple platforms to find its way into national coverage. From a coverage perspective, outlets were nearly unanimous in complimenting Sam for his practice and preseason performance, though there was disconnect between national and local portrayals of Sam’s story. Finally, third-party influencers – such as celebrities – demonstrated how non-news outlets had just as much impact – if not more – on a story’s development and framing than traditional mainstream news coverage.
CHAPTER IX: Sam’s fall

This chapter will examine discussions of Sam’s story during the fall, including his being cut by the Rams, his signing – and subsequent cutting – by the Dallas Cowboys, and post-Cowboys coverage. The chapter will end with a few interview insights that contributed to answers for this study’s RQs but were related to a specific moment in Sam’s timeline.

Cut from the Rams: Mainstream media. As August ended, teams had to cut their rosters to fit within league rules. By August 27th, the first round of cuts took place, and Sam was still on the Rams. ESPN’s NFL page said it was not a surprise because of Sam’s preseason performance (Wagoner, 2014u). The Post-Dispatch similarly argued, “Based on [Sam’s] preseason play, it would have been shocking had Sam been released during the cut to 75” (Thomas, 2014r, para. 2). Days later, the next round of cuts occurred. The ESPN Rams page still complimented Sam, saying he had “done nothing but make plays since the preseason began,” as seen by his “team-high six tackles” (Wagoner, 2014v, para. 3-4).

Despite this late positivity, on August 30th, it was announced the Rams had cut Sam. The story was picked up prominently by all of the outlets in this study. The New York Times focused on the important nature of Sam’s journey: “Michael Sam has a spot in history, if not with Rams” (Rhoden, 2014b). Calling Sam “an inspiration” (para. 21), the piece sourced Sam’s response to being cut via a statement he made on Twitter: “The most worthwhile things in life rarely come easy, this is a lesson I’ve always known. The journey continues” (para. 17). The comment
obtained over 7,000 retweets, again demonstrating how social media statements directly reached many readers (Sam, 2014c).

*ESPN*’s announcement of the cut demonstrated continued audience interest in the story as it generated over 30,000 Facebook shares (Wagoner, 2014w). The article was framed by coach Jeff Fisher’s support of Sam: “I will tell you this: I was pulling for Mike. I really was, and I don't say that very often. Mike came in here and did everything we asked him to do” (para. 9). The article’s sourcing of a positive tweet made by Jason Collins (para. 17) and referencing Sam’s popularity with fans – shown by his jersey sales (para. 23) – resulted in a pro-Sam tone. The *ESPN Rams beat justified the Rams’ decision by saying,* “It was a football decision that ultimately boiled down to two things: whether Sam could beat out Westbrook and, barring that, impressing the coaches enough to persuade them to go even heavier on the line by keeping 10” (Wagoner, 2014x, para. 6). The *Post-Dispatch* similarly used “a ‘football decision’” to frame its headline (Thomas, 2014s). Despite the positivity of the coverage, many *ESPN* readers celebrated as they thought it might mean an end to the Sam coverage:

> Is it bad to say that I am freaking glad he is gone? Seriously. Go to the Ram's team page on ESPN and every article from the last 3 days is about Sam being possibly cut. Get over it ESPN! (Audience, 2014ooo).

The new question became: what was next for Sam? The *ESPN Rams beat wrote that* Sam’s “performance in preseason games showed he can play in this league” (Wagoner, 2014y, para. 6). The beat argued Sam was one of the top 53 players on the team, suggesting that the team might try to find room for him on the practice squad (para. 6). The outlet cited “a league source (who) said the team would like to keep Sam there if possible” (Wagoner, 2014x, para. 14). Yet, the page later quoted reports from the *Post-Dispatch* that the Rams practice squad was already filling up with other players (Wagoner, 2014z, para. 3). Sure enough, Sam would not be signed to the Rams’ practice squad either.
While much initial mainstream commentary focused on the cut as a football decision, some coverage began to question why another team had not picked up Sam. The *Post-Dispatch* used the news of Sam’s Rams departure to counter the national media frames that had developed over the year, Bernie Miklasz writing, “[t]he ‘distractions’ thing always made me laugh” (2014c, para. 9). He continued by using arguments similar to queer media:

In Sam’s case, I viewed the ‘distraction’ caterwauling as a protective shield carried by those that couldn’t quite bring themselves to tell the truth. They just couldn’t come out and admit that they didn’t like Michael Sam or approve of his lifestyle and were sourly displeased by the thought of a gay man being part of a team. These folks didn’t fear distractions. They feared the fact that it was 2014 and the world was changing around them, and that Michael Sam was going to get his shot to play pro football — and frankly, there wasn’t a damned thing they could do about it. The only people made uncomfortable with the Rams giving an opportunity to Sam are simply uncomfortable with the modern reality. And uncomfortable about their own intolerance (para. 11-13).

Miklasz argued a media distraction never occurred:

With Michael Sam there was no media stampede. There was one dumb story on ESPN about Sam’s showering habits. (And only ESPN was distracted — by having to issue an apology.) … Rams players welcomed him. … He gave about as many interviews as any other player (para. 19-20).

*Post-Dispatch* columnist Bryan Burwell demonstrated how a single media-created distraction – the *ESPN* shower story – affected the league’s agenda (2014d). Burwell wrote:

“According to several NFL sources, they readily admitted that the *ESPN* report by Josina Anderson last week where she asked players about Sam’s shower habits in the locker room ‘did him no favors’” (para. 13). While Burwell – again – made it clear that “[n]o one in the Rams’ locker room had any issues whatsoever” (para. 18), he noted that the distraction fears, in large part caused by *ESPN*, might limit Sam’s options in getting signed by another team.

*ESPN*’s Kevin Seifer also wondered why no other team was signing Sam (2014). While arguing that homophobia had to be considered, Seifer appeared to at least partially defend not selecting a gay player because of distractions:

As we learned in the divorce between the Minnesota Vikings and punter Chris Kluwe, the NFL’s team concept -- fairly or unfairly, right or wrong -- frowns upon any attention a player receives other than for his performance on the field. None of us can get into the heads of general managers to gauge bigotry levels, but
we can state with some confidence that, when given the option between relative equals, they are much more likely to make the decision that draws the least amount of public attention (para. 14).

Seifer thus argued that media attention – created in this case by a player’s sexuality – could impair a team’s desire to select Sam.

From an audience perspective, Sam still obtained high reader interest six months after his public coming out. The Times’ weekly report of its most-read sports stories found that the Rams’ cutting of Sam was the week’s fourth most-read story (Top, 2014c).

Overall, while mainstream coverage largely defended the Rams’ cutting of Sam as being a football decision, broader conservations about Sam going unsigned caused at least some debate about other factors that might be at play.

**Cut from the Rams: Queer media.** Queer media similarly defended the Rams’ decision as being a football decision, based on the team’s stacked defensive line. In the days before the cut, Outsports made this clear: “The Rams’ decision to cut Michael Sam was never going to be based on homophobia” (Outsports, 2014c). Yet, Cyd Zeigler and Jim Buzinski argued homophobia might become an issue if Sam were to go unsigned post-Rams. The editors noted that each team had already passed on Sam in the draft, thus arguing, “If all 31 NFL teams pass up on Sam again, after proving himself on the field, it will be because of homophobia” (Outsports, 2014c, para. 16).

In this regard, queer media continued to criticize the distraction frame:

Sam has not been a distraction (You want distractions? Just tune into the Johnny Manziel Network, aka ESPN). … After a brief media flurry at the start of camp, Sam has been treated as just another player. … If any team passes on him out of fear of ‘distractions,’ that’s simply code for ‘we’re uncomfortable with an openly gay player on our team’ (Outsports, 2014c, para. 21).

*Outsports* cited assessments from *Post-Dispatch* reporters Jim Thomas and Bryan Burwell to justify its arguments (2014c, para. 2).
Upon Sam’s being cut, *Outsports*’ first assessment called Sam “a victim of the numbers game and not homophobia,” in line with its claims from earlier in the week (*Outsports*, 2014d, para. 1). The piece similarly went on to defend Sam’s preseason, claiming Sam “played quite well” and citing his weight loss (para. 8). The outlet also emphasized Coach Fisher’s clear statements that Sam was “no distraction” (para. 10). Like mainstream coverage, *Outsports* also included Sam’s tweet in response to the cut and argued that Sam was likely to be added to the Rams practice squad if no other team signed him (para. 4-5). Queer audiences continued to demonstrate their awareness of negative audience comments seen on mainstream outlets. “Most commenters over at *ESPN* are delighted,” one reader noted, linking to the mainstream site (*Audience*, 2014ppp). *Queerty*’s coverage of Sam’s cut linked to the *Los Angeles Times* for the news but referred to *Outsports*’ analysis on why the decision occurred, demonstrating the influence of queer sports outlet’s critiques (*Queerty*, 2014f).

*Outsports* later reported Sam would not be re-signed to the Rams practice squad (*Buzinski*, 2014r). As the *Post-Dispatch*’s Bryan Burwell had similarly reported, *Outsports* shared findings from other reporters who found that while other teams were interested in Sam, the dreaded media distraction was causing concern (*Buzinski*, 2014s). Peter King again drove discussion: “I talked to three team architects over the weekend. They’re concerned about the circus coming to town with the first openly gay player trying to make an NFL roster” (*Buzinski*, 2014s, para. 3). *Outsports* also shared this tweet from *Bleacher Report*’s Mike Freeman: “GM tell me: ‘Teams want to sign Michael Sam but fear the media attention.’ To me, that’s cowardice. But that’s just me” (*Buzinski*, 2014s, para. 2). Using these reports, *Outsports* continued to directly attack the distraction frame by saying Ray Rice, Terrell Owens, and other athletes were the actual distractions (*Buzinski*, 2014s).
Outsports used many mainstream reports to justify its claims. For example, Bleacher Report’s Mike Freeman (2014b) – cited on Outsports via his tweet (Buzinski, 2014s) – wrote about media distractions and homophobia in an article clicked on almost 200,000 times. Within the piece, Freeman cited many Twitter discussions that were occurring between other members of the press and sports community. NBC’s Ross Tucker – with over 131,000 Twitter followers – tweeted, “Michael Sam performed much better than most expected and still isn’t even on a practice squad?” (Freeman, 2014b, para. 3). In response, Buffalo Bills player Eric Wood replied, “blame that on espn. No one wants the distraction” (Freeman, 2014b, para. 4). This Twitter exchange became fodder for other stories (Smith, M., 2014), indicating how ESPN’s single shower story shaped discussion across media platforms. Freeman continued, “In interviews with a number of team officials, I can’t find one who will actually say to me, ‘He can’t play’” (2014b, para. 13). Thus, this flow of information that led to – and thus from – Outsports demonstrated how many platforms intersected to shape the analysis. This flow was also accelerated once again by the tweet of a single NFL player who spoke out against ESPN.

The same type of flow led from Outsports back to Peter King’s influential analysis. In this instance, King (2014d) criticized the media distraction justifications:

What circus, exactly? A little ESPN story about shower habits? That’s been the big controversy of the last four months with Sam. He’s had two press conferences, peaceful and uneventful ones, and met the press briefly after each of the St. Louis preseason games, as any player would be subject to doing. And that has created exactly zero problems for the Rams. Point is: If you scout Sam in the preseason and like what you see, don’t go looking for ghosts.

These narratives thus once again built across multiple-media platforms. Notably, influential sources spoke directly to audiences through their social media pages; these audiences were then able to further share the sentiments without ever reading a traditional news outlet.

Outsports guest columnist Anthony Nicodemo (2014) confirmed behind-the-scenes concerns about Sam as a distraction. “I’ve had countless conservations with so many folks the
last few days: coaches, athletes, media members and even a former NFL player. Every conversation has come back to ‘Attention,’” he said (para. 5). Based on this information, Nicodemo strongly solidified his own argumentative frame: “Michael Sam is not being signed because he is gay, not because he is not good enough” (para. 9). Nicodemo concluded by referring to this news’s impact on LGBT persons: “The movement slows down. All of this because NFL teams fear media attention” (para. 15-16). In summary, queer media coverage – as part of a larger critical commentary – concluded with its strongest assertion to date that Sam was cut because of his queerness.

**Cut from the Rams: Advocacy organizations.** As Sam was waiting for the Rams’ decision, advocacy groups were also heavily supportive. Advocacy organizations returned to the #SamFans initiative, promoting visible support for Sam online (GLAAD, 2014cc). Upon his being cut, GLAAD made its case for Sam by quoting president Sarah Kate Ellis in a blog post (Adam, 2014c) that was also promoted on Twitter (2014dd) and Facebook (2014ee). Ellis argued, “Sam’s strong preseason performance leaves us confident that he’ll be wearing an NFL jersey come the regular season kickoff” (Adam, 2014c, para. 4). In addition to many frames about Sam’s skill that complemented those supplied by news coverage, GLAAD also documented the historic nature of Sam’s journey, citing his ability to spark “a national conversation about equality in sports” (Adam, 2014c, para. 6).

Athlete Ally (2014rr) and the Human Rights Campaign (2014o) responded to news of the cut by retweeting Sam’s own tweet about how “worthwhile things in life rarely come easy…” These findings again demonstrated how advocacy organizations’ communication efforts helped to amplify Sam’s own voice. Ally also continued its communication tactic of promoting pro-Sam third-party voices. Ally’s Facebook (2014ss) and Twitter (2014tt) shared an *MLB.com* column
written by Billy Bean (2014), a former pro athlete. Bean complimented Sam’s preseason skill and criticized ESPN’s shower story: “Unfortunately, as the roster deadline approached, there was one ESPN reporter who volunteered an unprompted discussion of Michael and his teammates’ shower habits. It was antiquated hyperbole to attract viewers, and a giant step backwards for the media” (para. 3).

**In summary: Cut from the Rams.** As the Rams cut Sam, many mainstream outlets began highlighting how Sam was no distraction at all. Despite months of such arguments, a single ESPN shower story days before the cut reportedly affected teams’ thinking. Debates about why Sam was not on a team demonstrated the complexity of the flow of interacting sources, not only between mainstream and queer media but also across different types of media platforms. Player voices continued to be a discussion driver – including Sam’s own social media remarks, which were included in news coverage and further shared by advocacy organizations. With Sam unsigned, queer outlets became direct in their assessment that Sam was not playing specifically because of league homophobia.

**Dallas and Sam**

**Mainstream media.** On September 2nd, rumors began that Sam was headed to Dallas (Archer, 2014b). ESPN reported Sam would show for a physical and likely be signed (ESPN.com News, 2014m). The ESPN story demonstrated continued audience interest as it obtained over 50,000 Facebook shares. The ESPN Cowboys page ran several stories about Sam’s likely placement on the team, the outlet often in support of the decision: “Perfect fit: America’s team and Michael Sam” (Taylor, J., 2014a). Using the distraction frame as a positive, the beat argued Dallas tended to welcome media sensations: “While other teams might’ve been reluctant
to sign Sam because they feared his presence would be a distraction that’s a non-factor in Dallas where Jerry Jones believes the more mini-cams the better” (Taylor, J., 2014a, para. 7). Other coverage focused on football, stating Sam made “football sense for Cowboys” (McMahon, 2014a). Referring to the weakness of the Cowboys’ defensive line, the outlet spoke highly of Sam’s chances:

If anything, a case could be made for putting Sam on the 53-man roster right away. … He displayed that ability during the preseason, when he recorded three sacks in four games -- or three more than all the defensive ends who made the Cowboys' 53-man roster (McMahon, 2014a, para. 6-9).

Therefore, just days after mainstream media argued distractions and “football decisions” would hurt Sam, the Dallas beat writers now adjusted these frames in Sam’s favor.

Once Sam’s signing was official, the New York Times carried the story, sourcing Sam’s Twitter page as partial evidence: “Sam, who changed his Twitter biography to ‘proud Dallas Cowboys defensive end…’” (Belson & Shpigel, 2014, para. 4). ESPN also described how the Cowboys “downplayed the fact that Sam is an openly gay player” (Watkins, 2014b, para. 13). This was welcome news to some ESPN audience members: “ESPN…we know he is gay,” said one reader (Audience, 2014qqq). “Why do you feel the need to remind us every other sentence?”

Although much attention had previously focused on Sam being a distraction to a team, the ESPN Cowboys beat reported no such event occurred: “Michael Sam’s arrival met with shrug” (Archer, 2014c). While the team allowed Sam to speak to the media upon his arrival, ESPN reported how Dallas coach Jason Garrett did not want to focus on Sam during the coach’s weekly press conference. The outlet reported, “After the fifth question on Sam, Garrett said, ‘I think we’ve got to be careful about spending too much time on a practice-roster player’” (McMahon, 2014b, para. 5). Though the first Rams press conference was perhaps forced to address Sam, the Cowboys’ media approach minimized the story’s attention.
Coverage of Sam in Dallas quickly ebbed. As September progressed, reports about Sam’s practice squad performance were minimal. On September 12th, the ESPN Cowboys beat said Sam was “work[ing] hard” and “doing a good job in practice,” though it noted that “you shouldn’t expect him to join the active roster anytime soon” (Taylor, J., 2014b, para. 1).

Queer media. Outsports obtained over 29,000 shares when it reported Sam was going to Dallas (Zeigler, 2014tt), an audience number much larger than for many ESPN stories. To report the news, Outsports shared tweets from ESPN and NFL Network reporters. Outsports went beyond football to discuss how Sam’s Dallas signing had broader implications:

Culturally, this signing would be an earthquake. Texas is held up by the gay community as this country’s great bastion of homophobia. For the revered Cowboys to bring him in and sign him would send a very clear message that yes, at the end of the day, the NFL is a true meritocracy (para. 15).

Queer media also claimed that the Cowboys saved the NFL from a public relations problem, arguing “the smoking gun” of league homophobia was seen in the ongoing pattern of anonymous sourcing of league personnel (Buzinski, 2014t, para. 9). Despite queer media claims about mainstream homophobia, one Outsports reader blamed all media – queer included – for the situation: “the gay and straight press are going to ruin his life with these agenda filled articles that have NOTHING to do with him actually playing but them pushing their agenda” (Audience, 2014rrr). Therefore, audience members on queer websites also began to demonstrate how readers thought the media as a whole affected the league agenda in regards to Sam.

For its part, Queerty (2014g) covered the Cowboys news by citing reports from The Daily Mail, as well as once again shaping its analysis by sourcing Outsports. The outlet also shared Michael Sam and Vito Cammisano’s tweets to shape its story (2014g).

Like mainstream coverage, queer media reports about Sam’s practice squad performance were limited. On September 18th, Outsports (Buzinski, 2014u) referenced reports from the
*Dallas Morning News* that Sam was performing well, but otherwise, an apparent lack of beat reporting about the athlete seemed to affect the national outlets.

**Advocacy organizations.** Advocacy organizations also covered the news of Sam’s signing to the Cowboys. The Human Rights Campaign (McCarty, 2014b) and GLAAD (Murray, 2014d) posted the report on their blogs, citing mainstream reporting from outlets such as *ESPN*. GLAAD also continued to link to *Outsports’* analysis (Murray, 2014d). Athlete Ally (2014uu), the HRC (2014p), and GLAAD (2014ff) all congratulated Sam via tweets. GLAAD also continued to use more formal media relations tactics, again using president Sarah Kate Ellis to offer quotable analysis: “Michael Sam continues to change the game. He is a trailblazer and an inspiration, but, above all else, he is a great football player” (Murray, 2014e, para. 2). Yet, GLAAD also used its blog statement to share Ellis’s views on how progress needed to continue:

> That an accomplished player like Sam, who performed strongly in the preseason, was not picked up sooner is a testament to both how far we have left to go as a culture and how far the NFL has to go as an organization (para. 3).

Overall, mainstream and queer news, as well as advocacy organizations, had relatively little to cover about Sam’s Dallas experience from mid-September to mid-October. Because he was only a practice squad player, few athletic stories were possible.

**The Cowboys cut Sam: Mainstream media.** Weeks of relative silence came to an end when Dallas released Sam from its practice squad. On October 21st, the *ESPN* Dallas page reported the news, the coverage still demonstrating mass audience interest in Sam as it obtained over 31,000 Facebook shares (Archer, 2014d). The outlet again cited Sam’s reaction by sourcing statements he made on his Twitter feed (para. 4). *ESPN* sourced Dallas Coach Jason Garrett to justify the termination: “Sam got caught up in a numbers’ game” (Archer, 2014e, para. 1). The language was almost identical to frames used when the Rams cut Sam in August. The *New York Times* also reported the news, similarly citing Sam’s Twitter statements (Zinser & Shpigel, 2014).
20014). The Times cited the Cowboys’ statement about the termination made via the organization’s website (para. 3). Roughly nine months after Sam’s public coming out, his journey remained popular with Times readers, with the report listed as the fifth most-read story in the Times sports section that week (Top, 2014d).

The Cowboys cut Sam: Queer media and advocacy organizations. Sam’s Dallas departure also obtained coverage in queer news media and among advocacy groups. Like mainstream outlets, Outsports (2014e) announced Sam’s cut by including Sam’s Twitter statements in response to the news. These findings continued to demonstrate coverage’s heavy reliance on player Twitter statements for story sourcing. From a cultural impact perspective, Outsports argued the Cowboys’ decision “will give other gay pro athletes pause” (Buzinski, 2014v). Outsports included an audience poll that asked when readers thought there would be “another openly gay NFL player.” A plurality (35%) thought it would be “2020 or later” (Buzinski, 2014v), the latest option in the poll, demonstrating how many queer audiences thought Sam’s media and league treatment would have lasting effects on other athletes’ decisions to come out.

Counter to the Outsports coverage, Queerty (2014h) used snark, ending its article with, “On the bright side, now he’s free to explore reality television with Oprah again. Assuming, of course, she’ll still take his call” (para. 7). The outlet also focused on what it perceived to be the highlights of Sam’s story. These highlights included topics that were promoted by Queerty and other pop culture websites but not other news outlets, such as Sam’s Grindr photos (para. 2-3). Many audience commenters found the tone of Queerty’s coverage to be inappropriate or “disrespectful” (Audience, 2014sss).
Advocacy organizations were relatively quiet upon Sam’s departure, though GLAAD shared Sam’s “tweets (of) appreciation to #SamFans” (Heffernan, 2014). Again, this served as an example of how advocacy organizations commonly used their platforms to advance the voices of others.

Sam’s fall: An end-of-year perspective

With Sam no longer signed to an NFL team, the former SEC co-defensive player of the year was suddenly unemployed. As the rest of the football season progressed, Sam would never be re-signed, despite his preseason performance. This section will examine how news media outlets and advocacy groups wrapped up Michael Sam’s year.

Almost all of the post-Dallas attention Sam garnered was within queer outlets and among advocacy groups. The New York Times and ESPN were mostly silent about Sam in the last two months of the year. At year’s end, the Post-Dispatch called Sam’s journey one of “The Top 10 St. Louis Sports Stories of 2014” (O’Neill, 2014). The piece noted how much “media buzz” (para. 1) Sam’s story generated and recapped Sam’s biggest moments, from his public coming out to the eventual airing of the Oprah Winfrey special at year’s end. The Post-Dispatch concluded by writing, “Whether Sam surfaces with another NFL team or not, he has written history” (para. 4).

Queer discussion: Framing why Sam was not signed

Although mainstream coverage of Sam quickly faded, queer media still had a few things to say about the athlete.

As November began and Sam was still unsigned, Outsports argued that “Sam’s NFL snub (was) already at (an) historic level” (Zeigler, 2014uu). Outsports wondered how “a man who 12
months ago was being discussed by some as a possible first-round draft pick” was currently without an NFL job (para. 1). Continuing a frame that mainstream outlets in this study commonly ignored, Zeigler repeated: “Michael Sam is not on an active roster today because he is openly gay” (para. 3). To justify his arguments, Zeigler compared Sam to other major college conference Defensive Players of the Year and found almost all of them had NFL jobs — often starting jobs — at the same period in time. Zeigler further claimed that the media themselves made such homophobia apparent:

Remember the CBS Sports draft ranking of rookies three hours before Sam came out in February? He was ranked No. 90 on their board, slated to go in the third round. After he came out, he was suddenly less valuable, his sacks worth less than they had been just hours earlier and CBS dropped him to 160 — slated for the fifth round. What happened to drop him? He came out as gay. Period. That’s it (para. 18).

As weeks went by with Sam still unsigned, Zeigler continued using the argumentative frame that few players with Sam’s stats faced league unemployment. “90% of players with Michael Sam’s NFL stats are on a roster,” read one headline (Zeigler, 2014vv). Zeigler acknowledged that his piece was written because of audience criticisms he had received toward his previous arguments:

Yet a bunch of Michael Sam haters have sent me nasty emails about that article. Some of them were just filth, calling me - and gay people in general - every name you can think of. Others tried explaining that Sam isn’t that good and he only came out publicly anyway because ‘you gay people’ told him to (not even close to being true) (para. 3).

Zeigler’s arguments that Sam was talented enough to be on a team — meaning homophobia was the only remaining explanation — obtained no mainstream media interaction from the outlets in this study.

**Did Sam say he wasn’t in the league because he’s gay?** In late November and early December, days of coverage questioned whether Sam now regretted coming out when he did. This coverage offered another succinct example of how a story flowed through the hybrid media system.
In a *GQ* article, Sam stated, “If I had it my way, I never would have done it the way I did, never would have told it the way I did” (Corsello, 2014, para. 12). Instead, he said he “would have done the same thing [he] did at Mizzou,” meaning tell his teammates about it at the right time (para. 14). Yet, Sam addressed how he knew that was likely not possible because of his senior year success and the media attention. Thus, he concluded clearly by saying he had “no regrets” (para. 14). Yet, *Outsports* responded to the *GQ* interview with a headline: “Michael Sam wishes he hadn’t come out publicly before the draft” (Buzinski, 2014w) The piece was written by *Outsports*’ co-founder Jim Buzinski and caused some readers to argue, “Outsports is going with the complete distortion of what Sam said” (Audience, 2014ttt).

As many outlets – both queer and mainstream – shared similar assessments of the *GQ* interview, Cyd Zeigler responded the next day. Criticizing these reports – which included his own outlet – Zeigler’s headline read: “Michael Sam does not regret coming out, despite inaccurate headlines” (2014ww). Zeigler criticized how outlets used headlines to grab attention and distort what Sam was saying. He went on to describe how this distorted version of the truth would flow through the media system:

> Because of our culture’s obsession with the negative and with gossip (and, in truth, because of the (Thanksgiving) holiday), the real story here will get a tiny fraction of the attention and ‘shares’ received by the “Michael Sam regrets” pieces (para. 13).

Zeigler thus argued that inaccurate negative headlines – coupled with serendipitous timing of the holiday – would dominate social media, and thus rewrite the truth of the situation.

Zeigler also argued how news media practices shaped these realities:

> Instead of the important nuance in Sam's very words, we got the media putting regretful words in Sam's mouth, as though he regrets coming out because he is not currently with an NFL team. *PinkNews* lead with the headline, 'NFL star Michael Sam: I regret coming out publicly.' The sports-deficient editors clearly didn't realize Sam isn't an ‘NFL star’ and didn't read far enough to see what he said about regret. The *Washington Times* was just as bad with ‘Michael Sam: I regret coming out 'the way I did.’” All of that despite Sam saying, and I quote, ‘I HAVE NO REGRETS’ (2014ww, para. 8-9).
Zeigler continued by noting the cultural impact: “Sadly these headlines will give even more ammunition to the LGBT professional athletes too scared to come out” (para. 12).

Days later, a similarly problematic cross-media flow occurred again. Video of Michael Sam being asked questions by a freelance cameraman at the LAX airport was distributed by *TMZ* (2014b). In the footage, Sam was peppered with questions while working on his iPhone and waiting for his boyfriend. When asked by the freelance cameraman if he was not in the league because he was gay or because of the increased competition in the pros, Sam briefly looked up from his phone and said, “I think I was the SEC Defensive Player of the Year last year … so I don’t think it had to do with talent” (TMZ, 2014b, para. 3). The indirect answer led *TMZ* (2014b) to run with this headline: “Michael Sam[:] I’m Not in the NFL Because I’m Gay.” Indicating how much reach an outlet like *TMZ* had on the Sam story, its post obtained over 4,800 comments, by far more than the vast majority of Sam columns posted on other reputable news outlets throughout the year. Other outlets picked up the misleading headline, including *Queerty* (2014i), whose headline read: “Michael Sam suggests he was booted from the NFL for being gay.”

Conversely, *Outsports*’ headline portrayed a completely different reality: “Watch Michael Sam Totally Own TMZ in 2 minutes and 31 seconds” (Zeigler, 2014xx). Sam also had to respond to these media versions of his comments, posting on Twitter:

> Despite what headlines you may read, I’ve never said and have never believed that I am being kept out of the league. I know I have talent to play in the NFL and I look forward to getting an opportunity once again to prove that I can help a team win (Florio, 2014, para. 5).

These examples demonstrated how – even if these pieces were not shared by outlets such as *ESPN* or *The New York Times* – an outlet like *TMZ* obtained significant audience attention and influenced the discussion with its salacious and deceiving headlines.
**Queer discussion: Sharing positive stories.** There were some positive Sam stories covered by queer outlets at year’s end. *Outsports* shared news that a *Sports Illustrated* columnist had “nominate[d] Michael Sam for Sportsman of the Year” (Zeigler, 2014yy). The *SI* column by Phil Taylor (2014) said Sam could have complained about many unfair things that occurred to him throughout the year – such as his falling draft stock or the *ESPN* shower story – but Sam refrained. Taylor continued by offering a compliment: “[Sam] left the social commentary to others, knowing that he would lend power to the LGBT struggle for equality just by putting on his pads” (para. 7). *Outsports* also shared news that *GQ* Magazine had named Sam “one of GQ’s Men of the Year” (Zeigler, 2014zz). *Outsports* thus continued to promote the Sam story by sharing mainstream coverage that recognized Sam’s achievements that year. Advocacy groups also continued their role of acting as an aggregator and sharer of positive-Sam news. For example, GLAAD further distributed the *GQ* story via Twitter (2014gg) and its blog (Donovan, 2014). Similarly, Athlete Ally shared the *Sports Illustrated* nomination via its Facebook page (2014vv) and retweeted Phil Taylor’s tweet announcing the nomination (Athlete, 2014ww).

**Queer discussion: An end-of-year retrospective.** Late in the year, *Outsports* looked back on Sam’s journey with a statement that demonstrated how *Outsports* impacted Sam, as well as how Sam impacted *Outsports*:

> The most important and most-read story I ever wrote for Outsports was the behind-the-scenes feature about Michael Sam coming out. That was the craziest month of my life: Getting the call from Howard Bragman about Sam coming out, counseling his team on how to come out publicly, then appearing on 60 media outlets in three days. Sam continues to be an inspiration to me, and it was a privilege to be a big part of the rollout of his story. It will always be one of the proudest moments of my career (Zeigler, 2014aaa, para. 17).

The comments reiterated this study’s findings that relationships between journalists and publicists, as well as factors such as similar perspectives between the reporter and the story, shaped coverage. In this instance, the journalist himself even gave strategic suggestions to Sam on how he should proceed.
Outsports also highlighted its own importance within the queer-sports movement. After sharing popular queer blog Towelroad’s (Towle, 2014) “80 most powerful comings out of 2014” – a list that included many athletes – Outsports reported that it was “certainly proud to have been the publication where so many of those athletes chose to tell their story” Zeigler, 2014bbb, para. 5). The comments therefore demonstrated how a single media organization – one that strived to share as many stories as possible about gay athletes – could shape broader media and public discussion. Outsports (2014f) also posted which stories were the outlet’s most read for the year. Michael Sam articles were all over the list, including: #6: The behind-the-scenes coming out report, “The Eagle Has Landed;” #14: “Gross. Disgusting. Weird. Watching NFL players kiss wives, girlfriends” (in response to Sam’s kiss); #15: “Vulgar Michael Sam sign shows up on ESPN’s College GameDay;” #22: “Michael Sam set to join the Dallas Cowboys;” and #29: “Michael Sam jerseys No. 2 selling among rookies.” The most-read Michael Sam article – coming in at number two for the year – was “Michael Sam’s NFL snub already at historic level,” the article in which Zeigler used stats to argue homophobia could be the only logical explanation for Sam’s not being signed. Overall, the report demonstrated how much of an interest Sam was to queer readers throughout the year.

Queer discussion: Highlighting fan homophobia. A final major source of queer media coverage – one that was not as widely seen in mainstream press – was reports of fan homophobia displayed throughout the football season. One Outsports story reported on an “LSU fraternity apologiz[ing] for (a) Michael Sam banner” that read: “Michael isn’t the only Sam Getting the ‘D’ tonight” (Buzinski, 2014x, para. 1). The story was picked up from a piece in the New Orleans Times-Picayune, as well as a report from the LSU campus paper, The Daily Reveille (para. 1-2). Weeks later, a similarly “vulgar” sign appeared at a South Carolina football game,
captured as *ESPN* cameras panned the crowd (Buzinski, 2014y). The sign read: “Michael Sam couldn’t even handle dem Cocks” (para. 2). *Outsports* picked up the story via a post in *Deadspin*, that latter article obtaining over 52,000 views (Burke, 2014b).

**Concluding work of advocacy groups.** As with queer news media, advocacy group communication about Sam also waned as the year ended. The Human Rights Campaign continued to occasionally reference Sam. Close to National Coming Out Day in October, the HRC promoted Sam’s coming out quote: “I want to own my truth…no one else should tell my story but me” (Human, 2014q). Using a shareable image of the quote, the organization obtained over 6,000 likes on Facebook (Human, 2014q). GLAAD (2014hh) similarly retweeted a quote Sam posted on Twitter on Spirit Day, a day focused on awareness of bullying of LGBT youth. These organizations thus used Sam’s words to promote their respective causes. Athlete Ally (2014xx) also continued its tactic of using its platforms to distribute pro-Sam columns, such as a piece by *CBS New York’s* Jared Max (2014), who wrote: “Michael Sam Isn’t Alone, So Why is He Doing This…Alone?” Once again, these organizations continued to act as their own media platforms, sharing content that espoused values similar to their own.

After the Cowboys had cut him, Sam became more actively involved with queer advocacy groups. In late October, he attended an event at GLAAD’s Atlanta office that launched the organization’s Southern Stories initiative. GLAAD Tweeted (2014ii) and Facebook posted (2014jj) photos of the event and distributed a story on its blog (Torres, 2014). The tactic of sharing social media images of the celebrity paid off as popular outlets such as *JustJared* (2014) picked up the event via the photos.
Final notes from interviews

This section will end with a discussion of additional insights gained from some of the interviews of this study. While most interview results have already been discussed in other areas of the findings, a few insights – not directly linked to a specific event presented in Sam’s timeline – addressed organizational strategy questions and issues of theory and power.

Notes on power. The lack of mainstream coverage questioning league homophobia after Sam was cut speaks to issues of power relevant to this study. Cyd Zeigler argued “what surprised” him the most about Sam’s story was:

how little courage the people in the media have … to say what is painfully obvious, that Michael is not in the NFL because he’s gay. In fact, they won’t even cover it. I can’t get someone at NFL.com or NFL Network to honor the words Michael has said publicly. The NFL does not want people talking about this, clearly. … You know, there are things the media certainly does to keep, to keep sources that they need happy. … And, so, these guys, to the NFL’s credit, it gets cozy with a lot of them, and a lot of these guys will protect the NFL, because of the special access that they get (personal communication, March 4, 2015).

The lack of mainstream coverage asking why Sam was not on a team thus raises broader questions of power between journalists and the organizations they cover for a living.

Lessons for future players and organizations. As the Sam story came and went for the St. Louis Rams, Artis Twyman looked back at the event with a better perspective on how an organization could handle having an openly gay player on its roster. As no team had ever knowingly faced this experience before, Twyman and the Rams were the first to go through the process. Twyman said his biggest takeaway was appreciating that, “every time [Sam] opened his mouth, it was national news” (personal communication, March 6, 2015). While saying he’s never had a “Peyton Manning or Tom Brady”-level star on his team, Twyman reported that Sam generated more press attention than any player he had ever had. “I think I prepped him well to handle some of the questions,” Twyman recounted, “but I think I would do more just cause,
because I realized everything he said was news, not only in sports, but even outside of sports” (personal communication, March 6, 2015).

Twyman also argued – as a public relations professional – internal relations matter, down to meeting the needs of a specific individual: “The biggest goal that I wanted to take away was that [Sam] had the opportunity, just like anyone else, to make this team” (personal communication, March 6, 2015). Twyman ended his thoughts by saying the whole process was “an experience, to say the least,” concluding with a statement that greatly summarized how behind-the-scenes realities of who Michael was shaped the organization’s public relations realities:

But, you know the best thing about it is that Michael Sam is a decent guy; if he wasn’t it might have been a little bit more difficult, you know what I mean. He just wanted to be who he was and play football. He didn’t want to do gay parades, he didn’t want to go speak on gay rights issues, he didn’t want to do all of that. He wanted to be who he was, comfortable who he was, not hide who he was and play football, and that’s what we wanted to kinda help him do (personal communication, March 6, 2015).

Wade Davis shared his views on what lessons had been gained for other gay players who may face the media in the future. Davis said “one of the hardest things for the media” is to avoid focusing on a player’s sexuality upon his/her public coming out, thus limiting or ignoring the person’s role as an athlete (personal communication, March 29, 2015). Davis spoke in terms of framing, saying he hopes the media will “not frame the entire story around the athlete’s sexuality.” Speaking to issues of power, Davis described why queer athletes want to be considered athletes, not gay individuals. He argued: “When you’re a kid … you don’t know your sexual orientation but you do know you want to be an athlete.” Davis argued that many queer athletes, even as adults, are “still trying to understand what [being gay] even means.” Therefore, Davis hopes media outlets will better understand these realities and personal difficulties as they handle future athletes. Yet, Cyd Zeigler noted that if the athlete plays American football, attention will remain because “football is king” (personal communication, March 4, 2015).
While Zeigler said he was surprised how athletes in other sports failed to gain much national attention, he cited how football players – such as two placekickers from smaller schools – always become national stories.

Athlete Ally’s Hudson Taylor said he believes the media are essentially checking boxes when a player comes out, guided by the notion of how to cover the “first” storyline (personal communication, March 11, 2015). Once the “story gets run, nobody’s head explodes, it’s fine, that box is checked. So, the second time it becomes less of a story.” Thus, over time, Taylor predicts these dynamics will change for out athletes.

The power of queer media. One question that developed from interviews and findings was: should media outlets be considered activist organizations? Similarly, how much influence do queer media have, and has that changed over time? When asked if Outsports had changed over the years because of the dramatic shift in queer rights since the outlet was formed in the late 1990s, Cyd Zeigler responded by saying it was the other way around:

It’s not that Outsports is changing because of what is going on because of sports, but we are hanging sports.” He proceeded to discuss how the outlet had made a “conscience decision a year and a half ago, that [it was] going to tell the stories of every single LGBT athlete [it] could possibly get a hold of so that when people looked out at the sports landscape, they could no longer say, like a year and a half ago, some people would keep telling me that there are no gay people in sports, but particularly professionally sports. So, we decided we were going to change it. Three years ago, I couldn’t get mainstream sports writers simply to ask athletes questions about having a gay teammate or (about) gay issues, so we did it ourselves. … so we decided we were going to use this platform to make the rest of the media, (who was) just kinda sitting on the sidelines. So, I think it’s the other way around. It’s not how has the change in sports affected us, it’s the fact that we made a change in sports (personal communication, March 4, 2015).

While Zeigler said that the outlet never used to have competition in the queer-sports space, he said it now competes with the likes of The New York Times, ESPN, and Sports Illustrated (personal communication, March 4, 2015). Speaking to the platform’s power in the agenda-building process, he continued: “I think most of the time, I think it’s them taking our lead and we’re still ahead of the curve on this, ya know, seeing our stories in Sports Illustrated and ESPN, you see this stuff all the time.” He went on to emphasize how Outsports, not Sports Illustrated...
Illustrated, was one of the outlets to get the Sam story. Speaking to behind-the-scenes agenda-building realities, Zeigler credited the outlet’s ability to get so many coming out stories because of to the “trust” it has built up with people, referencing how athletes call him directly to share their stories.

Factors beyond media relations and the role of movement organizations. Interviews also demonstrated much behind-the-scenes work that is outside of media relations. Wade Davis argued that real change is happening far beyond the realm of media. “I don’t believe the media is the best place to go,” Davis said in regards to bringing change (personal communication, March 29, 2015). While Davis argued media were important for “optic(s),” as well as having the ability to have “broader reach” in showing various types of gay masculinity, he said other forms of public relations – such as training seminars and personal relationships – are “more effective” ways advocacy organizations can bring change. Davis said media coverage is just “sound bites,” whereas behind-the-scenes work allows for personal understanding, the development of relationships, and storytelling. Athlete Ally noted a similar organizational strategy, such as working with Jason Collins and the NBA to institute rookie-training programs that educate players as soon as they enter the league (H. Taylor, March 11, 2015).

Davis noted how organizations within the same movement have different roles and strengths in bringing about change. In speaking about the relationships advocacy organizations have with each other, Davis said:

I think the power of partnering really comes from having different access points, right, so GLAAD has really wonderful relationships with the media that You Can Play doesn’t have. But [You Can Play has] really great access to athletes that GLAAD doesn’t have. Or, an HRC has a shit load of money, right, you know what I mean, and granted, I don’t always agree with the tactics of all these organizations, but I do think that there’s a lot of great opportunities to kind of cross pollinate and educate each other… (personal communication, March 29, 2015).

From a strategic perspective, Hudson Taylor noted that, as “an allied based organization … when an athlete comes out … we’re not probably the first person that’s called … [for] …
what that means for the movement” (personal communication, March 11, 2015). Instead, Taylor
noted how his organization has a different media strategy role within the movement. As seen, the
organization showed how third-party influencers have great power to be a voice to bring about
change, obtain media coverage, and reach audiences. Seen throughout these findings, Ally
utilized and promoted straight athletes through the use of op-eds, columns, and interview quotes,
relying on these sources to be the voice of the organization. While Wade Davis hopes the media
can let an athlete be an athlete, from a slightly different perspective, Taylor’s organization is
“looking to get athletes to become better advocates,” hoping the “voice, the cultural capital,
(and) the leadership of the athlete [can] bring about greater societal change” (personal
communication, March 11, 2015).

Taylor argued that those working for the advocacy organization themselves are not
necessarily the voices that are most powerful: “My voice is not going to be the most impactful,
so it’s really important for us to figure out whose the appropriate messenger when a given story
come to the forefront” (personal communication, March 11, 2015). Instead, the organization uses
a different type of media relations approach that goes beyond press releases or quotes from
organizational staff:

I can reach out to all 100 of these athletes (that we have relationships with) and personally say, ‘Oh, hey, x
has happened in your state, would you provide a quote or comment on it?’ And, I think that, that has helped
us become a little more flexible as those news items come up, rather than having me, the Executive
Director, quoted, ya know? Like, we just got Mark Cuban, we got him to commit to a comment in Texas,
and his voice resonates more than mine or anyone else’s from the organization would (H. Taylor, personal
communication, March 11, 2015).

From the perspective of access, power, and inclusion, these organizations have found that
voices beyond their own – voices that already have an existing powerful resource of social
influence – can be facilitated to help spread the message of the movement. Yet, as Taylor
summarized, other issues of power can be at play that are far outside of the organization’s
control. Taylor used a non-Michael Sam campaign experience to demonstrate how non-
organizational-affiliated third-party influencers can greatly shape an organization’s campaign. When asked how Ally has been successful in obtaining awareness for its campaigns, the organization’s Olympic-based P6 campaign was discussed (H. Taylor, personal communication, March 11, 2015). The campaign – which attempted to add a sexual orientation non-discrimination clause to the Olympic charter – was extremely well-shared on social media pages, thanks in large part to the use of many celebrity third-party endorses who shared photos of themselves wearing P6 campaign clothing.

Using this as an example, Taylor said advocacy organizations could sometimes be successful based on chance, coupled with the luck of power: “What I realized was, was that Anna Wintour really controls the world.” Taylor’s quote meant that, even though Ally’s goal is to facilitate celebrities and athletes who may have a stronger third-party voice than the organization’s own, P6 movement success was based on the powerful abilities of the editor of Vogue. “As far as the celebrity side of things, a lot of them, we didn’t do anything with,” Taylor said (personal communication, March 11, 2015). Instead, Taylor found that, you have all these celebrities who would love a permanent place in Vogue or in a mag … so if Anna Wintour calls and makes an ask, you will receive, you will respond accordingly, because your brand and your credibility forever more could be implicated by that (H. Taylor, personal communication, March 11, 2015).

Therefore, Ally was able to obtain third-party celebrity endorsements with the help of another third party endorser – Anna Wintour, even though Ally had no apparent access to her itself. This ending discovery reinforced the findings of this study that found that determinations of an advocacy organization’s success must sometimes go beyond an examination of the organization itself. Thus, be it Ellen DeGeneres sending a tweet in support of Michael Sam or celebrities speaking on behalf of an organization for reported notions of self-interest, organizations’ most
successful moments may sometimes rely on alignments with certain outside individuals who, themselves, wield a significant amount of power or influence.

**Chapter IX conclusion**

The findings in this chapter demonstrated how mainstream coverage of Sam largely disappeared following his termination from the Dallas Cowboys. In contrast, queer media continued to discuss the broader implications of Sam’s story. This included discussions about what Sam’s unemployed status indicated about league homophobia. Yet, the argument received little to no interaction with the mainstream outlets of this study, demonstrating issues of power disparities between mainstream and queer outlets. This chapter also demonstrated how salacious headlines from less-than-reputable outlets were still able to influentially build and flow across news and audience media platforms. Finally – when examining the relationship between organization efforts and eventual media content – interview insights demonstrated how behind-the-scenes and non-media relations dynamics of organizations need to be fully considered.
CHAPTER X: Discussion and conclusion

The first half of this chapter will cover this study’s main contributions determined from answering RQs 1-4. The second half will discuss the insights learned from answering RQ5, therefore describing this study’s theoretical, methodological, and critical contributions to agenda-building and agenda-setting scholarship. This chapter will close by discussing the study’s limitations and offer concluding remarks.

Discussion of RQs 1-4

RQ1: How did mainstream news media, queer media, queer organizations, and news and social media audiences’ topic agendas and content frames interact with each other, over time?

RQ1: Mainstream news media. Complementing existing scholarship (Shehata & Stromback, 2013), mainstream news outlets continued to be influential forces in the hybrid media system. Yet this study offered new insights into how mainstream outlets such as ESPN and the New York Times were often just one of many players interacting to shape a broader and more complicated flow of information about Michael Sam. In some instances, mainstream outlets appeared to be at the center of the information flow. This included ESPN’s and the Times’ special-access stories of Michael Sam’s coming out. In these instances, the reputable status and audience reach of the outlets allowed them to obtain access to Sam’s coming out announcement, in turn making them the key sources of information for the story. ESPN was also able to shape perceptions of Sam’s skill as analysts placed significant value on the NFL combine, an event that was prominently aired on the mainstream network. Such mainstream coverage still had great

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impact on Sam’s story as the highly publicized, media-driven combine was often used to justify why Sam dropped so low in the draft. Therefore, mainstream media still sometimes demonstrated more traditional top-down intermedia agenda-building and -setting abilities.

At other times, a mainstream outlet was only one of many voices in the hybrid media system. Needing a vast amount of coverage to fill content needs, mainstream outlets often relied on reports from other news venues to supplement the content of their own stories. For example, the Times cited outlets such as Deadspin to establish that the league suffered from issues of homophobia. These findings demonstrated how queer-supportive activists were able to build their way into mainstream coverage through other media channels. This occurred as the Deadspin piece was written by Chris Kluwe, a former professional athlete and straight ally affiliated with Athlete Ally. Thus, the voice of the queer-rights sports movement was able to flow up to the New York Times. Yet, this queer-supportive voice was heard even without the Times, because over four million readers viewed the Deadspin column. The Times was thus a single platform in this pro-queer flow. The principles of Mathes and Pfetsch’s (1991) older media “spill-over” findings therefore continue into the modern hybrid media system as the topics and frames promoted by alternative groups or media outlets can still flow into mainstream media coverage.

This study’s findings also offered new insights about how queer voices were often able to interact with content produced by mainstream outlets. For example, outlets such Outsports and advocates such as Wade Davis were often sourced in mainstream coverage, especially in local outlets. Even when queer voices were not directly cited in national mainstream coverage, queer frames were still often able to flow upward through other means. For example, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch often sourced queer advocates; the Post-Dispatch pieces were then commonly
picked up by ESPN. Thus, the agenda-building flow sometimes required a few steps, but pro-queer voices were still ultimately able to obtain prominent coverage, again complementing Mathes & Pfetsch’s (1991) arguments about alternative spill over into mainstream outlets.

To generalize how an issue is portrayed in media coverage, much agenda-building or agenda-setting scholarship methodologically has used a few mainstream outlets to exemplify a broader media agenda (Camaj & Weaver, 2013; Kiousis, Park, Kim & Go, 2013). This study’s findings demonstrated how many different media agendas and frames are occurring – even within mainstream outlets – at any given time. In many instances, outlets far beyond ESPN or the Times appeared influential in shaping story flow. A diverse group of mainstream outlets – be it the local Post-Dispatch or a national but non-traditional venture such as Deadspin or TMZ – had a say in the Sam story. With all of these outlets shaping the flow of Sam’s journey, no singular mainstream media agenda was apparent.

This study’s findings also offered new insights that explain how, in order for a story to spread in a hybrid media system, mainstream media coverage sometimes needs to interact with non-mainstream media venues, as well as audience sharing of the story. For example, Dale Hansen – a mainstream local commentator – made argumentative comments that were seen by millions. Yet, his video was not a success because of mainstream outlets like ESPN or the Times. Instead, a broad-reaching voice like Ellen DeGeneres – a woman who is also a queer individual – was able to use both an older media platform – television – and a newer media platform – her Twitter page – to share Hansen’s frames with millions of viewers. DeGeneres herself was thus arguably a hybrid individual – queer and mainstream – who used a hybrid set of platforms – television and Twitter – to share frames developed by a mainstream but local news commentator. Thus, binary categorizations of whether an individual is queer or mainstream, whether a platform
is newer or older, quickly blurred. All the while, Hansen’s frames also became widely distributed because queer media, queer advocacy organizations, and both queer and mainstream audiences further shared his video. These findings further demonstrated how, even if prominent outlets like *ESPN* or the *Times* did not cover an aspect of Sam’s story, a moment like Hansen’s speech could still reach broad audiences by flowing through a mix of other mainstream media channels, venues that were interacting with alternative and audience-based media platforms.

Finally, mainstream media used many different forms of information subsidy materials to build and shape their coverage. Professional organizations still commonly molded coverage through official statements or press conferences. Yet, many mainstream stories also used subsidies such as social media comments to frame coverage. In many instances, single tweets were able to generate entire stories. But information sourcing patterns went far beyond press releases or social media as other stories were shaped by personal text messages, the use of local reporting, or technology applications or “apps.” For example, *ESPN* issued a statement via Twitlonger, an app designed to facilitate a social media platform. Therefore, an application built for a newer media information subsidy was used to frame resulting mainstream coverage. While public relations literature often looks at the agenda-building abilities of one or a few types of information subsidies to analyze an organization’s influence (Ragas, 2012; Ragas, Kim, & Kiousis, 2011; Weberling, 2012), these findings offer new insights about how methodological approaches need to use both newer and older forms of information subsidies to better represent the full spectrum of agenda-building influences on modern media coverage. Scholarship that only examines one or two forms of PR activity or that ignores behind-the-scenes realities may therefore miss much of the agenda-building process.
In summary, an examination of mainstream coverage demonstrated how many mainstream media outlets, organizations and individuals have a voice in shaping coverage flow. While mainstream outlets sometimes have more traditional top-down abilities, many media venues – be they queer outlets, local outlets, advocacy organizations, or influential individuals – have a role in the creation and shaping of this flow. Many individuals and media venues must therefore be accounted for when studying agenda building in the hybrid media system.

**RQ1: Queer media.** Queer news media had both similarities and differences to mainstream news coverage and news processes. First, queer outlets sourced other queer voices more than mainstream coverage did. While Queerty – a non-sports news entity – often defaulted to mainstream coverage for the news aspect of Sam stories, Queerty commonly cited Outsports for analysis of Sam’s journey. Similarly, Outsports often disseminated pro-Sam content written by other media or organizational outlets. This included partnerships with GLAAD, as well as the sharing of information from sources in which Outsports had close ties, including Sam’s publicist. Queer outlets also commonly distributed content from Michael Sam’s own social media channels. Finally, in examples such as the Chip Sarafin story, Compete Magazine – a local outlet that was niche upon niche as it was an LGBT sports magazine based in Arizona – demonstrated how even highly focused LGBT media platforms could obtain national coverage by flowing through the right mix of media channels across many different types of platforms. Overall, these findings demonstrated how queer media content had the ability to flow across many media channels – including mainstream outlets. Yet, as scholarly work examining queer news media remains limited (Miller, B., 2014), these findings demonstrated new insights into the differences between queer and mainstream news media, as well *within* queer media.
For example, while queer news outlets showed a propensity to interact with content from other queer sources, this did not always result in pro-Sam coverage. *Queerty* was the only outlet in the study to commonly share salacious and personal information about Sam. This occurred as the outlet furthered the flow of content from widely read outlets such as *TMZ*, as well as from other gossip outlets that shared content such as Sam’s reported Grindr photos. While many gossip-based stories were not seen in traditional mainstream news coverage, they affected the flow of information received by audiences as these posts were read, shared and discussed by millions of readers. These findings demonstrated insights into how queer news content was not a monolith of pro-Sam content. Just as mainstream media often demonstrated varying agendas and frames, so too did queer media. While studies have attempted to look at queer media agendas by looking at a few queer outlets to determine queer media frames (Miller, B. 2014), these findings demonstrated how scholarship must understand that queer content cannot be generalized into a single, or assumed, pro-queer frame.

Finally, like mainstream media, the ability of queer media outlets to shape coverage and discussion in other media venues appeared fluid and changing depending on the circumstances. At times, queer outlets led with stories, such as *Outsports*’ own special-access story upon Sam’s coming out. The outlet also developed frames that shaped the perception of these stories, such as the argument that Sam was not on a team because of league and media homophobia. At other times, queer media were conduits of other media information, be it the constant sharing of local reports from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, distribution of mainstream media content, or reaction to content from audience-based platforms. Examples like the Hansen video demonstrated how queer outlets had a stronger position in the hybrid media system when content was of interest to many different players, ranging from influential individuals like Ellen DeGeneres to broad
support among audiences. Queer media had less reach when challenging these other players, such as *Outsports’* criticism of mainstream outlets or audiences during the OWN or post-draft kiss examples. In these instances, queer media frames did not find support from other media outlets or audiences, venues and individuals who were needed if queer media-generated frames were to become more widely disseminated.

**RQ1: Advocacy organizations.** All organizations examined in this study were able to, at times, obtain media coverage of their points of view, though the circumstances for each organization varied. GLAAD was often sourced through the voice of president Sarah Kate Ellis, her statements having been distributed by the organization in many forms of information subsidies. Athlete Ally was most frequently sourced via statements or writings made by Ally-affiliated athletes, such as Brendon Ayanbadejo. Both mainstream and queer outlets commonly sourced these organizational voices. While many studies have examined how news media processes affect movement-sourcing dynamics (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Gitlin, 1980; Sobieraj, 2010), these findings demonstrated how advocacy organizations were well sourced but used different forms of media relations to accomplish this coverage. Offering new theoretical and methodological insights, these findings again showed how a focus on a single type of organizational information subsidies would have misconstrued the level of influence organizations had on media content. While agenda-building scholarship still frequently analyzes the theory through the analysis of press releases (Hopmann, Elmelund-Praestekaer, Albaek, Vliegenthart & de Vreese, 2012; Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz & van Atteveldt, 2012), this traditional type of information subsidy was rarely used. Instead, Twitter and Facebook were not only able to reach audiences directly, but the former platform, in particular, was a frequently sourced subsidy, especially if a statement was being shared by an
individual’s account. Content from organizational blogs and interviews with organizational figures appeared to be far more influential forms of subsidies than were press releases, yet a focus on any particular subsidy would have missed an organization’s multi-faceted use of all of these subsidies.

Scholars such as Andrew Chadwick (2013) and David Karpf (2012) have looked at how movement organizations use their own media platforms to reach their movement publics, but the current study’s findings showed new dimensions of organizational media use that affected broader story flow. At times, advocacy organization tactics were akin to traditional information subsidies, their content being picked up in news coverage. Yet, organizational media platforms also played a different role in the intermedia agenda-building process. Organizations were also able to act as their own influential media channels. While audiences often obtained news via outlets such as ESPN or Outsports, readers were also shown to have obtained information via organizational media platforms, such as GLAAD’s Facebook or Athlete Ally’s Twitter. Many organizational posts had great audience interaction, as seen by a significant number of comments, shares, “likes” or “favorites.” Therefore, with their online audiences in the thousands and sometimes millions, organizations had the ability to be influential media disseminators when sharing stories or information that had broad audience interest. Social movement scholarship has long examined issues of access between SMOs and news media outlets (Gitlin, 1980; Rohlinger & Brown, 2013), but this study’s findings demonstrated how SMOs already have media access through their own modern platforms. Beyond sharing their own content, in many instances, organizational platforms shared content from other outlets. Organizations commonly shared pro-queer voices, be it retweeting Michael Sam or sharing comments made by allied athletes. With the size of organizations’ media followings, these platforms had great reach.
Advocacy organizations thus had an important role in how information flowed through the hybrid media system. Beyond obtaining traditional news coverage, these organizations were able to directly reach audiences through their own media platforms.

**RQ1: News and social media audiences.** While scholarship has explored agenda melding to demonstrate how audiences match the agendas of the media they are consuming (Shaw & Weaver, 2014; Vargo, Guo, McCombs & Shaw, 2014), this study found that audiences obtain their information from many diverse outlets. This included not only mainstream news outlets but also popular entertainment programs such as *Ellen* or *Live! with Kelly and Michael*. Additionally, based on comment board discussions, audiences clearly read or watched many types of mainstream outlets, be it ESPN, Deadspin, or TMZ. Based on the noted differences in content between these outlets, audiences were faced with many competing frames.

The implications of these audience results are akin to this study’s findings on information subsidies. When viewing information subsidies more holistically, an agenda-building reality appeared that was quite different from what previous scholarship may have appreciated. In the audience context, even as scholars have expanded agenda setting to account for more media voices, studies still essentially treat media agendas through relatively binary or mutually exclusive realities. This has occurred as a limited number of more traditional news outlets are often used to illustrate a media agenda. For example, if examining political ideology, scholars have tested coverage on *MSNBC* to examine a liberal point of view and coverage on *Fox News* to assess a conservative agenda (Vargo et al, 2014). But this study’s findings showed how audiences are encountering media realities that are quite diverse and not mutually exclusive. Comment boards showed how audiences were discussing content from many outlets, venues that sometimes had competing coverage. Audiences also engaged with outlets such as *TMZ* and
Deadspin, venues that have arguably not been adequately considered in current scholarship. Additionally, while queer audiences were generally more pro-Sam and ESPN audiences were generally more anti-Sam, there was clearly no singular queer audience or mainstream audience agenda. Instead, audience sentiment showed nuance that was not always merely pro- or anti-Sam. While this study did not attempt to study agenda-setting effects, these findings showed how methodological approaches to the theory need to more broadly appreciate the types of media sources that audiences are engaging with, as well as the diversity of audience thought that goes far beyond simple pro- or anti-binary categorizations.

This study also demonstrated how influential individuals – be it Ellen DeGeneres, Chris Long or Michael Sam – could use their personal social media platforms to directly reach audiences without need of news coverage at all. This further developed findings from Freelon & Karpf (2015) that even tangential celebrities such as a WWE wrestler were able to drive discussion of – in that study – political debates. Following these opinion leaders, audience members’ personal media accounts then became intermedia agenda builders themselves as an audience member’s retweet or Facebook share spread to those audience member’s own followers. In turn, each receiving audience member could become his or her own agenda builder. Based on the design of these audience-based media platforms, audience sharing could beget additional audience sharing as Twitter and Facebook algorithms facilitate moments like Sam’s sack of Johnny Manziel to become a “trending topic,” allowing for the further spread of the information as it becomes more visible to all readers. While older media agenda-setting scholarship examines how news outlets shape audience thought (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and newer reverse agenda-setting scholarship (Kim & Lee, 2006) examines how audiences shape news coverage, this study’s findings showed how these conceptualizations need to be diversified.
This study’s results demonstrated how media agenda building is not only between audiences and news outlets, but also between influential individuals and audiences, audiences and other audiences, and a mix of other relationships between media outlets, platforms, and individuals.

This study also offered new insights about queer audiences. These audiences – both on queer news sites and on advocacy organization platforms – often discussed audience feedback seen on non-queer outlets. This included referencing content seen on mainstream outlets such as ESPN, as well as broader audience conversations happening on social media platforms. Findings demonstrated specifically how queer audiences frequently encounter mainstream news and audience discussion that had anti-queer frames. Queer audiences then shared and discussed these anti-queer frames on more queer-friendly channels. Audience conversations thus demonstrated yet another ability to build the agenda for other audience discussions.

Findings on queer audiences therefore offer the agenda-setting literature new insights about niche audiences. While queer audiences often demonstrated a propensity to read and engage with conversations occurring on mainstream channels, mainstream audience discussion boards almost never showed engagement with queer media. For example, while queer media audiences often discussed what was being said on mainstream platforms, audiences on mainstream outlets almost never had conversations about what was being said on Outsports. This suggests that many queer audiences appeared to encounter both queer and mainstream information flows whereas mainstream media consumers may have rarely encountered queer-generated information flows, unless those flows were provided in the content of mainstream outlets. Implications are that minorities may encounter mass media flows more than non-minorities encounter minority media flows. If such differences do exist, then it becomes more
important for scholars to better appreciate variances in coverage between mainstream and niche sources.

It should be noted that anti-queer comments posted on queer organizational social media pages demonstrated how some anti-queer individuals encountered queer media content on social media channels. This implied that anti-queer readers may not directly engage with content from queer news outlets, but they may engage with pro-queer information flows that are being shared across audience-dominated channels, such as Twitter or Facebook. This served as another example of how, even if audiences did not directly interact with a news story, the story, its sources, and frames could still reach many audiences through the use of audience-based media platforms.

**RQ2: How did queer organization communication materials and tactics differ, if at all, from other queer organizations?**

Findings generally suggested that GLAAD – as a well-established mainstream organization – used the most traditional public relations tactics of the SMOs reviewed in this study. GLAAD commonly used press releases, organizational blog posts and on-camera interviews to spread its frames. Consistent with its role in the movement, GLAAD’s media relationships afforded it prominent media placement. Still, GLAAD frequently used its blog as an information subsidy in a manner akin to a standard press release. Blog posts were filled with official statements from president Sarah Kate Ellis, as well as allied individuals. Yet, while press releases are inherently meant for news outlets, blog posts also reached non-journalist sources, including the organization’s movement followers. This occurred as GLAAD often shared its blog posts throughout its social media channels. Blog posts further differentiated themselves from press releases as the posts commonly used content from other sources, such as video of Sam kissing his boyfriend or of Dale Hansen’s commentary. This allowed posts to act as both
traditional news media information subsidies and as content that directly reached movement audiences, supporters who could then – using their own media platforms – share GLAAD’s content further. Akin to Chadwick’s (2013) hybrid media system, these findings demonstrate how organizations themselves should be considered in a more hybrid manner.

Athlete Ally’s common tactic of using third-party allied voices as a main form of communication also offered new information about organizational message strategy. Ally’s use of straight athletes offered a unique ability for the organization to work with supportive partners who were not often members of the community itself, i.e. not queer. These speakers were used to broaden the voice of the movement. Athletes were arguably celebrities in their own right, having the ability to obtain coverage in popularly read outlets such as *Sports Illustrated* or the *Huffington Post*. Ally’s use of these athletes proved successful in allowing the organization a strong voice in the Michael Sam story. Yet, this tactic was not without concern. While allied individuals were able to spread the organization’s desired frames to wider audiences, the third-party-like nature of athlete opinions did not always explicitly tie back to the organization. As Hudson Taylor noted, this tactic must therefore balance success for the movement with success for the organization. While scholars have examined the impact of opinion leaders in a number of areas, from bloggers and social media (see Gruzd & Wellman, 2014) to women’s clothing fashion (Summers, 1970), these findings offer new insights on third-party opinion leaders that may assist queer SMOs’ abilities to reach broader publics.

The Human Rights Campaign, though mainstream, rarely used traditional forms of information subsidies such as press releases. Consistent with Cyd Zeigler’s arguments, this may have been because the Michael Sam story had little to do with the HRC’s main political role within the movement – at least not directly. Yet, when the HRC did speak on Sam’s behalf –
commonly through the use of Facebook or Twitter – it oftentimes reached and engaged with a much wider audience than did the actions of GLAAD or Athlete Ally. This occurred because the size of the HRC’s media audience was in the millions. Therefore, when the organization shared messages about Sam, those messages were widely shared by movement followers. From a resource-mobilization perspective (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), this offers movement scholars insights into how social media resource-heavy organizations have a strong voice on movement issues, even if those issues do not directly relate to the organization’s primary objectives.

Finally, through the use of their own media platforms, organizations not only had their own voice, but they also demonstrated an ability to be intra-movement agenda builders or setters. Throughout the year, social media posts shared by GLAAD, the HRC, or Athlete Ally were commonly shared by other movement organizations. Often times, these other organizations were smaller or local chapters. Thus, when exploring the agenda-building relationships between media and organizations, the impacts of movement groups on other movement organizations should be considered.

**RQ3: How did mainstream news media coverage differ, if at all, from queer media coverage?**

This study’s findings indicated that, in some ways, mainstream media coverage was more similar to queer media content than previous scholarship may have predicted (Miller, B. 2014). There were few major topics regarding Sam’s journey that mainstream media covered that queer media did not. Additionally, many mainstream voices often used frames that were also being used in queer media. For example, the *Post-Dispatch* argued that no Sam distraction existed. Some *ESPN* commentators similarly advanced the notion that use of “distraction” was a mask for league or media homophobia. Coverage within certain parts of mainstream outlets, such as *ESPNNW*, was often extremely similar in tone to that seen in queer outlets. This similarity in
coverage occurred – in part – because queer news and advocacy sources were commonly used as sources. This was especially true in Post-Dispatch coverage. Thus, findings demonstrated how queer voices might in fact have more power than perhaps previous examinations of alternative voices may have predicted (see Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991). Yet, pro-queer commentary seen in mainstream outlets often times came from niche sub-outlets within these outlets, such as ESPNW. Primary coverage in ESPN instead often focused on the “Sam as a distraction” frame.

Other differences occurred as queer news outlets – especially Outsports – were generally the only voices in this study to heavily question why Sam was not on a team after his Dallas termination. While queer media were able to place many frames into mainstream coverage, when queer media frames became critical of the league and mainstream media, those frames obtained little coverage in mainstream outlets. Therefore, queer media agenda-building abilities appeared limited when queer outlets questioned the existing power structure.

Sourcing pattern differences between mainstream and queer media also altered the frames used by the outlets. For example, queer media more holistically evaluated Sam’s athletic abilities, giving more equal distribution in coverage regarding his collegiate career, NFL combine, Mizzou Pro Day, character qualities, and preseason performance. Conversely, mainstream outlets, especially ESPN, placed significant value on Sam’s lackluster performance at the NFL combine. This occurred despite ESPN reporting that coaches and scouts said the combine was one of but many factors that affected the scouting process. Mainstream outlets also frequently used anonymous sources in stories that greatly shaped Sam’s journey; these stories appeared to have effects on league and audience agendas. For example, league sources admitted the ESPN shower story – a report that was based on anonymous sources – stirred fears of a media distraction. Thus, a story based on a single anonymous quote trumped repeated arguments made
by the Rams and others that, in fact, Michael Sam was not a distraction to his team. The anonymous-sourcing patterns created a few insights and even more questions about how and why such a sourcing practice occurred. As shown by the sentiments of Cyd Zeigler, in one sense, the use of anonymous sources was important, as, without anonymity, the potential realities of behind-the-scenes homophobia may not have been illuminated. Yet, as Coach Fisher argued after the ESPN shower story, the use of anonymous sources was, at other times, used in an unethical sensational manner to generate story lines. Findings on the use of anonymous sources once again demonstrated how journalism processes and practices could not be simplified into uniform truths.

Issues of power and news processes were also arguably responsible for some of the differences between mainstream and queer news coverage. For example, ESPN’s focus on the NFL combine over the Mizzou Pro Day may have stemmed from ESPN and the NFL’s business models. The NFL combine is a media-centric event that obtains days of coverage and revenue for both ESPN and the league. While many scouts are in attendance at both the combine and university pro days, many journalists and corporate sponsors are not. Therefore, an outlet’s financial incentives – akin to news process effects related to market-driven journalism (Cohen, 2002; McManus, 1994) – in promoting an event appeared to shape the level of importance applied to media and league discussion of a player.

Additional news process factors arguably built Michael Sam’s draft day kiss into such a big event. The NFL draft – like the combine – is a huge event for both the NFL and ESPN. Just days before Sam’s selection, no media outlet reportedly had access to Sam’s viewing party. Yet, at the last minute, ESPN gained access because one of its producers had reportedly built up trust with Sam’s management team. The trust was developed because of existing relationships, as
ESPN was also giving Sam an ESPY. Thus, a powerful network that had strong business partnerships with the league generated hype for an event like the NFL draft, again demonstrating how market-driven journalism could draw attention to a story. In turn, audiences were in place en masse when Sam kissed his boyfriend live on television. And thus, a media moment became a much-discussed topic, arguably because of a host of news-making processes that built the event into major significance.

News process factors such as business and capital requirements thus kept intact at least some top-down mainstream media influence. Therefore, while the findings of this study demonstrated how many media platforms, organizational players, and individuals can shape a story’s flow, mainstream outlets still have the ability to – at some moments – be the most forceful drivers of a topic or frame within a broader story. In these instances, even if all of these players have rippling and interacting flows in the same theoretical pond, mainstream outlets may be able to make larger splashes at certain key moments in time. That said, these findings also demonstrated when niche outlets, organizations, individuals, or audiences may be able to make larger splashes of their own.

**RQ4:** What other organizational strategies, such as the use of differing information subsidy materials or behind-the-scenes relationships, affect the agenda-building process in a hybrid media system?

Newsroom ethnographers (Gans, 1979; Tuchmann, 1978) have demonstrated how factors such as access, newsroom processes, and source credibility impact the building and shaping of news coverage. Yet, these often-cited foundational studies explored newsrooms and more traditional forms of media relations; foundational public relations agenda-building scholarship similarly examined older forms of information subsidies, such as press releases, agency reports, and practitioner interactions with journalists (Turk 1985, 1986). The current study explored
many forms of media content that went far beyond what was produced in newsrooms. Therefore, this study developed insights about factors that affect the agenda-building process within a newer hybrid media system.

First, developing the findings of Pat Curtin (1999), the importance of relationships to the agenda-building process was a constant theme of this study. Interactions between publicist Howard Bragman and editor Cyd Zeigler offered many examples of how behind-the-scenes relationships can shape news coverage. For example, Bragman sent Zeigler a text message to announce that the “Eagle Has Landed.” Later, he forwarded Zeigler a father’s Facebook post that ended up becoming a story on Outsports. Qualitative factors such as trust and friendship between publicist and journalist thus mattered. In this instance, Bragman had strong access to Outsports, and Outsports had strong access to Bragman, with Zeigler even getting a special invitation to attend Sam’s pre-announcement weekend.

Organizational strategy also affected news content. The Rams’ Artis Twyman shared many examples of how media relations tactics impacted the agenda-building process. In one instance, the Rams organization structured its rookie news conference to allow Sam to have his own set-aside time, resulting in coverage that shared many of Sam’s message frames. The team then limited media access to Sam. With no access for most of June and July, coverage mostly disappeared. Yet, when Sam was able to speak, his words and messages obtained great attention. This included the serendipitous timing of his media avail during the Tony Dungy controversy. Twyman also helped train players for media interviews, indicating how public relations professionals in part shaped Sam’s journey. PR scholars such as Zoch and Molleda (2006) have attempted to develop agenda-building models based on media relations and information subsidies, but traditionally conceptualized subsidies such as press releases were not seen in many
of this study’s examples. This again demonstrated how important it is to consider organizational strategies that affect the content-building process.

Similar patterns applied to advocacy organizations. For example, GLAAD broadened its message by partnering with Wade Davis to offer an authentic voice from a gay athlete, again demonstrating the use and influence of opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Davis also possessed unique methods of access. As a former player, the league trusted him; as a gay man, advocacy organizations trusted him. The result was frequent sourcing by media outlets, partnerships with queer advocacy organizations, and behind-the-scenes trainings and relationship building with teams. Insights gained from Athlete Ally demonstrated how relationships with allied players drove much of the organization’s media agenda-building strategies. Thus, these findings contribute up-to-date insights to those found by previous public relations (Curtin, 1999) and movement scholars (Andrews & Caren, 2010) about what factors affect organizations’ abilities to obtain and shape news coverage.

Of note to the public relations literature, findings from this study emphasized how public relations is far more than just media relations. While scholarship has often studied agenda building and public relations by examining media relations information subsidies (Rim, Ha & Kiousis, 2014; Turk, 1985, 1986), this project revealed that much public relations work stems from personal relationships, internal relations, training seminars, and other behind-the-scenes happenings. Wade Davis actually argued media relations often have little value. He claimed that news coverage offers “sound bites” that may do little to bring about change. Instead, the You Can Play Project and Athlete Ally demonstrated how trust, relationships, and educational programs with league sources and teams were often far more effective at bringing change. The behind-the-scenes realities found throughout this dissertation would not have been captured if
this study’s methods were limited to examinations of press releases or tweets. These findings demonstrated how important it is to return to the origins of agenda building that pre-dated media relations aspects of the theory. Cobb and Elder (1971; 1972), who developed the theory from a political science perspective, examined how policy or voter agendas were built. Strategies like lobbying and factors such as ideology affected the agenda-building process. While media were not involved, public relations was.

Future research should further investigate additional aspects of public relations that may also affect broader agendas, be they media agendas, public agendas, or organizational or movement agendas. This study identified many different agendas, as well as many factors that influenced those agendas. For example, advocacy organizations were able to shape league agendas through training seminars with teams that educated players about queer sexualities while also giving straight players room to share their questions and concerns. Therefore, future scholarship should take similar approaches to methods used by Curtin (1999) by combining quantitative analysis with qualitative methods such as interviews to better appreciate the varied dynamics of organizational public relations efforts.

One of this study’s key findings showed how queer news outlets, advocacy organizations, and influential individuals were able to shape public agendas without need of news media. Through the use of blogs and social media pages, organizations and individuals were able to directly reach millions of audience members. Audience members themselves also had the ability to shape the agenda for other audience members. Therefore, this study demonstrated how it is important to view media-based agenda building more broadly than perhaps much existing scholarship may appreciate. In other words, most current scholarly work examines news media agenda building. This study’s findings demonstrate how many other media players and platforms
are involved in the agenda-building process. All of these media players and platforms therefore need to be considered in tandem when examining the agenda-building process. Finally, the diversity of agendas present – be it movement agendas, audience agendas or, in this case, even the NFL’s agenda – need to be considered in addition to all of these varied media agendas.

**RQ5a:** How do these findings further develop the theories of agenda building and agenda setting when considered within a hybrid media system?
**RQ5b:** How do these findings further develop the theories of agenda building and agenda setting when applied to niche publics and niche media?
**RQ5c:** How do these findings further develop the theories of agenda building and agenda setting when considering the role of power among organizations, media, and audience publics?

This chapter has so far illuminated many of the primary insights gained from this study. The following section will synthesize all of these points of discussion into the study’s major contributions and implications. These implications will be broken down into the following: theoretical developments, methodological developments, and critical and reflexive thoughts about public relations and agenda building. A few suggestions for professionals are also included throughout.

**Theoretical contributions.** As the volume of media platforms expands, scholars have struggled with conceptualizing how information is flowing through the media system. Scholarly questions in the areas of agenda building and agenda setting often come down to: Who is leading whom? Historically speaking, information was often portrayed as unidirectional, flowing from organizations to news media to audiences.

In recent years, scholars have expanded conceptualizations of how this flow may be occurring. To better show the effects of an active audience, Kim and Lee (2006) developed reverse agenda setting to conceptualize how audiences also have a role in shaping news coverage. To better appreciate the growing diversity of media, scholars such as Shaw and
Weaver (2014) developed agenda melding, which describes how audiences are shaped by the media their particular group engages with. These theoretical developments contain the following principles: a) a recognition that many outlets can have agenda building or setting abilities, b) a notion that audiences have a very real role in this process, and c) an acknowledgment that agenda is not a singular term. This study’s findings have built upon these principles by furthering scholarly understanding of how agenda building operates in a hybrid media system.

Korean media scholars have developed the concept of agenda rippling (Kim & Lee, 2006). Agenda rippling is “the process of (inter)net users developing important public agenda through key channels of the internet including blogs, personal web pages, bulletin boards, online debate sites” (p. 5). Originators – described as “ordinary citizen communicator(s)” – cause ripples when an originator comes “in contact with [a] message and spread(s) the agenda via online channels” (p. 23). Ultimately, these audience members may then be able to shape broader media and policy discussion, both online and off, through reverse agenda setting. Kim and Lee (2006) gave several examples of small case studies to show how Korean citizens encountered and shared story content online, which led to broader discussion of certain topics by traditional media outlets, other media organizations, and additional online and offline audiences.

Yet, the present study further develops these conceptualizations of agenda rippling, particularly in two areas. First, Kim and Lee (2006) still drew a model that used linearly directional arrows to represent the sharing of information in a media system. The present study determined that information flow in a hybrid media system is less a unidirectional wave and more of a multi-directional rippling pond. Second, Kim and Lee’s developments focused on originators as audience members, essentially treating them as antecedents to traditional mass media agenda building and agenda setting. The present study has shown how many different
individuals or organizations need to be conceptualized as originators, people, groups or media venues that are all able to share information and thus shape broader communication flows. Before more specifically explaining the developments of this study, I first want to define the use of terms that I will use to describe this information process.

When an originator shares information in a media system, the sharing of that information can be conceptualized as the throwing of a pebble while the media system can be conceptualized as a pond. When the pebble of information hits the pond, a ripple results. A ripple is the interaction of that information with other originators in the pond, i.e., are other originators further sharing that information, are they countering that information with other arguments, or are they staying silent? If ripples spread, then broader information flow about a topic occurs.

With this foundation laid, the following illustrates how the process actually works.

**Who is in the pond?** This study’s findings demonstrated that many diverse and unique players are interacting in the pond, i.e., a hybrid media system. First, at the organizational level, this study examined advocacy groups to see how their efforts attempted to shape broader media discussion of Michael Sam. While these organizations sometimes shared similar messages through similar media channels at similar times, more often, these organizations showed great diversity on when and how they got involved in a story. Sometimes, one organization would inject an argument while others were silent. Other times, one organization would use a press release while another would use social media engagement. Each time an organization spoke up, it was throwing its own pebble of information into the pond. Therefore, all of these advocacy organizations need to be placed into the pond separately because of the diversity of their messages, actions, and moments of getting involved.
Queer advocacy organizations were not the only organizations involved in Sam’s case. The National Football League, individual teams, corporate sponsors, and a host of other organizations created information ripples in the media system by throwing out their own pebbles throughout Sam’s journey. Some of these organizations, such as the NFL, often had a significant role in the pond. At other times, teams had an important say. Like advocacy groups, sometimes these organizations were creating similar types of ripples at the same time – their content, timing, and/or methods of communication being in near sync. But, at other times, certain organizations would be speaking while others would be silent. Or, organizations used different messages or different media platforms. Therefore, these organizations must also be placed into the pond separately from one another.

Then, there are the media organizations. Traditional mass media studies have often conceptualized the media agenda essentially as a singular mainstream news-based agenda (Shaw & Martin, 1992; Wanta, Golan & Lee, 2004). Agenda melders have diversified the media agenda in some ways, such as breaking up American political media agendas into ideological camps by separating out MSNBC from Fox News (Vargo et al., 2014). Scholars have also looked at how niche media, blogs or other outlets can have a different news agenda from mainstream presses (Meraz, 2009; Miller, B. 2014). Akin to the diversity of organizations, this study’s findings demonstrate how all of these news media players need to be placed into the pond separately. This occurred as coverage in mainstream outlets, such as ESPN, the New York Times and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, all caused different types of ripples at distinctive times. Queer news outlets similarly showed great diversity in their coverage, their behind-the-scenes relationships, and their levels of influence. Therefore, queer news outlets also need to maintain their unique identity
when placed into the pond, as combining them into a singular “queer media agenda” would miss the diverse reality of their existence.

Furthermore, while traditional mass media scholarship often still focuses on news outlets to demonstrate media agendas, this study’s findings showed how many non-news media outlets affected Sam’s story. Online blogs, salacious columns, YouTube channels, and a host of other media outlets and platforms all had a say in the way Michael Sam’s story ultimately flowed across the pond. At times, these non-news outlets were quite influential. Therefore, all of these non-news types of media must also be placed in the pond.

Then, there are audiences. Traditionally, audiences acted as the end receptors of the agenda-setting process. With reverse agenda setting and other theoretical developments (Kim and Lee, 2006), the audience is now perceived to have an active role in the ultimate flow of a story. This study’s findings continued to locate audience influence, seen in audience social media activity, comment board discussions, and individual and collective actions – both online and offline. Once again, these findings demonstrated how there is no singular audience agenda. Instead, mainstream audiences often differed from other mainstream audiences. Queer audiences often differed from mainstream audiences. And, queer audiences often differed from other queer audiences. Therefore, audiences – preferably conceptualized as individualistically as possible – themselves need to be scattered across the pond separately, maintaining unique categorizations as needed to best represent their differing agendas and actions. Theoretically, each individual audience member has the ability to throw his or her own individual pebble of information into the pond.

Finally, there is one last set of players that also needs to be placed into the pond separately: influential individuals. Throughout these findings, celebrities such as Ellen
DeGeneres, Daniel Radcliffe or Harry Styles, athletes such as Chris Long, and public officials like President Barack Obama, created their own ripples that were able to strongly spread throughout the pond. These individuals could arguably be considered part of another group, be it an organization like the St. Louis Rams or the White House, part of the media, or simply as individual audience members. Yet, a separate category of influential individuals, more akin to third-party endorses and opinion leaders (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) seems most apt. This is because these people’s statements were made as individuals. Still, these people are not like just any other audience member because of their influential status. Therefore, influential individuals should be conceptualized as a different category, each having their own circle of influence.

While initial conceptualization of agenda rippling was based in audience abilities to promote discussion online, this study advances the arguments of Kim and Lee (2006) to place many different individuals, organizations, and outlets together in the pond. With each one having its own unique characteristics, they are all acting as their own ripple originators.

**How do ripples spread throughout the pond?** With the categories of originators conceptualized, the second question is how they are interacting with one another in the pond. Theoretically, each player – be it an organization, media outlet, or individual – has the ability to cause a ripple in the pond by throwing a pebble of information. A ripple occurs when one of these players speaks on behalf of the issue, i.e. Michael Sam in this case. The ripple itself is therefore the spreading and sharing of information in a hybrid media system, be it a news article covering a topic or an audience member sharing of a personal opinion on Twitter or a YouTube video of Dale Hansen on Facebook. Sometimes, a ripple is small, such as one caused by an ordinary individual with few followers online or an organization with little credibility or reach on a topic. At other times, players’ unique characteristics can likely cause a large ripple, such as
ESPN live broadcasting Sam’s emotional kiss or the Human Rights Campaign sharing the news of Sam’s public coming out. If ripples significantly spread throughout the pond, a broader flow of information results, a flow that defines which topics are being talked about, as well as how they are being discussed. Based on the findings of this study, I would theorize that the ability for a ripple to spread across the pond depends on two factors.

First, the ripple originator’s own characteristics need to be considered. Questions of their characteristics include: How influential is the originator? Where in the pond is the originator placed at any given time? How many connections does the originator have? These questions all get to how much influence, and capacity each of the ripple originators has.

From there, the content of the originator’s argument needs to be considered. The success of a ripple may relate back to theoretical developments created by Robert Entman’s (2004) cascading activation model, which operationalizes how topics and frames are diffused across news media. Entman argued that topics, as well as the attributes and frames that describe them, can spread more easily if there are elements such as cultural congruency between a sender and receiver. Based on this study’s findings, ripples operate in a similar manner. If the content of a ripple is congruent with both the originator and a receiver, then the ripple is likely to continue across the pond, meeting with every other originator along the way until the ripple stops. As the pond has many originators of content at all times, if two ripples are on the same argumentative wave length, their ripples are likely to combine, creating more strength and reach to the ripple. As the ripple continues to interact with more and more ripples of similar frequencies, it continues to spread out across the pond. (The impacts of incongruent but interacting ripples will be discussed in a moment.)
This type of ripple congruency was seen in the Dale Hansen viral video example. The ripple originated with Dale Hansen’s on-air commentary. The originator therefore had unique characteristics that allowed for an increased likelihood that the throwing of his pebble would result in a larger ripple. In other words, Hansen was a credible sports commentator, he had strong production values and broadcast abilities, and his white, straight, Southern male traits arguably made his pro-queer content more unique. With his already strong originator characteristics, the content of his message then became a factor. With Hansen’s strongly worded message in support of Sam, his arguments matched in congruency with many other players in the pond. So, his video commentary was able to successfully build up strength as it interacted with other originators.

The spread of the ripple then relied on the individual characteristics of each of the other players in the pond, coupled with their own congruency with the message content. So, while an individual audience member who encountered and shared Hansen’s video may have had few characteristics that would have allowed him or her to cause an influential ripple, the common congruency of the message allowed his or her ripple to have more influence. Additionally, while one individual audience member may only produce a small ripple, thousands of congruent individuals suddenly create a much larger ripple. The Hansen ripple was also congruent with the views held by a highly influential individual – Ellen DeGeneres. The strength of DeGeneres’s individual characteristics was able to make a more influential ripple. Throw in some influential advocacy organizations and other players, and the Hansen video broadly rippled across the pond. In this instance, major players, such as ESPN or the New York Times, were generally silent on the story. Their silence equated to a lack of pebbles being thrown, meaning that they were not providing any competing messages. Therefore, there was no counter-ripple limiting the
expansion of the Hansen pro-Sam ripple. Thus, Hansen’s video was able to go viral by spreading across much of the pond.

In the current study, two patterns seemed to explain what limited the reach of a given ripple. First, if originators with strong unique characteristics were silent and non-responsive to incoming ripples, then ripples might dissipate. For example, Outsports’ post-Dallas arguments that Sam was not in the league because of homophobia were not as strongly able to ripple across the pond. Outsports had individual characteristics that were much stronger than many players in the pond but still not nearly as strong as an ESPN-like originator. The queer outlets’ messaging about league and media homophobia was likely not congruent with messages from other influential originators. Therefore, because influential originators such as ESPN were silent on discussing these frames, Outsports’ originated ripple was essentially hitting walls across the pond, diminishing its ability to spread. This was in contrast to the Hansen example when, although ESPN and the Times were silent, other influential originators got involved, such as Ellen DeGeneres.

Second, a ripple might be limited in its reach if countered by an incongruent ripple. Such an instance occurred during debates about whether Sam would be a distraction. Some ripple originators argued Sam would cause a distraction. Other originators said Sam would not be one. Therefore, competing ripples were bumping up against each other, preventing any universal flow across the pond. If a ripple started with an originator that had stronger unique characteristics, or if the congruency of the message was consistent with more players in the pond, one ripple might have stronger reach than the other. Still, in these instances, competing ripples were able to generate broad discussion about a topic or frame such as the distraction debate. During times of competing ripples, many players in the pond are talking about the topic (i.e., distraction), even if
they have different frames. This is in contrast to the Outsports homophobia argument, where the ripple simply dies on its own because it is not getting any traction with other originators in the pond.

The summary of what determines how information ripples through a media system is conceptualized in the following table:

| TABLE 1 |
| Considerations that affect how information ripples through a hybrid media system |

**Overall Model:**

\[
\text{Originator Characteristics} + \text{Message Congruency} = \text{Information Reach}
\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>An Originator’s:</th>
<th>Is Information:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positionality</td>
<td>On the same wavelength</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Encountering silence from other originators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>Hitting competing wavelengths</td>
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Ultimately, if a ripple is able to spread widely, a broader story flow results. In some instances, such as the distraction debate, two competing ripples were able to consume much of the pond. At these times, multiple information flows are occurring throughout a hybrid media system.

**Methodological contributions.** For future scholarship to better be able to analyze a hybrid media system’s patterns of agenda building, this dissertation demonstrated two methodological issues. This included findings that showed: a) that many different agendas within one story are occurring at any given time, and b) that many different forms of information subsidies are being used, each able to shape an issue.

These findings demonstrated how generalizations of agendas into singularly defined entities miss the vast richness of reality. This dissertation sought to examine whether there were different agendas between mainstream and queer media outlets. The findings demonstrated how queer media not only differed from mainstream media at many points, but also showed how
mainstream media agendas often differed from other mainstream media agendas and how queer media agendas differed from other queer media agendas. These differing agendas were also seen among advocacy organizations, league organizations, and audiences. For example, labels of any type of singular movement agenda would be mistaken as individuals such Wade Davis spoke about how, as an advocate, he is often at odds with queer media agendas that make his work more difficult. Therefore, these findings demonstrate how future scholarship should be very careful with applying the term agenda too broadly across organizations, media outlets or movements. While this study’s aim was not to define what ultimately became or did not become an agenda, these findings instead demonstrated how scholars attempting to map the development of such agendas need to critically think about: a) how the underlying information that may ultimately form an agenda is rippling through a media system, b) who or what has a role in rippling that information, and c) why there are variations in how information ripples, depending on the circumstances of an event or media topic. While future development of measures and theory may become quite complicated when applying this study’s findings, a fuller understanding of these principles may help develop theorizations that better portray modern media realities.

From a methodology perspective, scholars should also look at a diversity of media outlets, including non-news outlets, to best assess media coverage and organizational and audience agendas. For example, if studying media coverage, mainstream media coverage should be examined alongside queer media coverage. But, even within these media categories, multiple outlets should be studied, if possible. Additionally, several types of outlets should be studied. In other words, if studying queer media, reputable outlets such as Outsports should be studied.
alongside gossip outlets. If examining mainstream media, studying an outlet like TMZ may be just as informative as ESPN.

These findings also demonstrate how scholarship must consider non-media relations tactics – especially non-news media relations tactics – that are often being employed by organizations to shape agendas. While much existing agenda-building scholarship focuses on public relations from a media relations lens (Curtin, 1999; Ragas, 2013), this study found that many agenda-building tactics do not engage with news media outlets at all. If many different players are in the agenda-building pond, then organizations can ripple their message to audiences and other organizations by using their own online media channels or through the use of offline tactics. Therefore, these findings help prompt a call for public relations scholars to more broadly appreciate the agenda-building process by using methods that better capture organizational activities that are not based in news media relations.

**Critical and reflexive thought.** As scholarly work examining the relationship between the public relations profession and the concept of power remains limited (see Berger, 2005; Cabosky, 2014; Motion & Weaver, 2005), it is important to take a moment for reflexive thought to discuss how these findings speak to this public relations/power relationship. Public relations scholars have often struggled to have a critical or reflexive voice, their work based in a profession that some would argue inherently attempts to limit voices that are attempting to disrupt the status quo (Motion & Weaver, 2005, p. 52). In a few meaningful ways, the findings of this dissertation are disruptive.

First, these findings portray a media world that is arguably quite different from the realities presented by much previous agenda-building and agenda-setting scholarship. I would argue that much existing scholarship has long presumed a generalizable world where there are
mass-based and clearly defined agendas. Decades ago, these theories developed in the days of perceived mass media. There was claimed to be a collective media agenda and a corresponding audience agenda that was set by mass media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In applying agenda building to public relations, scholarship in the 1980s attempted to examine how topics and frames were placed onto this media agenda (Turk, 1985, 1986). Yet, as Gandy argued in 1982 – long before emergence of a hybrid media system – these generalized theories may have excluded minority populations, such as Gandy’s example of African American audiences at the time of his writing (p. 6).

While opinion polls – which are often used to test the existence of agendas (Iyengar & Simon, 1993; Wanta, Golan & Lee, 2004) – can result in mass-based analysis to mutually exclusive questions, this study’s findings demonstrate the world is perhaps not so binary. While some ripples can find mass agreement or consistency across the theoretical pond, these findings demonstrate a diverse world filled with a mix of agendas. This study gave voice to queer audiences and queer content. Yet, it also showed that even within the same categories of individuals or organizations – such as queer audiences or queer media outlets – there is a great diversity in agendas. This dissertation has thus supported the notion that the world is not clean and binary but, instead, actually rather queer.

Secondly, this dissertation arguably demonstrates how scholarly work about public relations and agenda building perhaps too strongly focuses on media relations – especially mainstream news media relations. Foucault argued, “Power relations are rooted in the system of social networks” (1983, p. 224). Foucault’s arguments seem to aptly apply to how agenda-building theory developed in the public relations literature. As discussed, while Cobb and Elder (1971) developed agenda building within the political science domain, public relations scholars
adapted the theory by focusing on news media relations work (Turk, 1985, 1986). Yet, this development places greater power on certain public relations social networks of knowledge over others.

What do I mean by this? If a standard public relations textbook describes the profession in ten chapters, one or two of those chapters would likely focus on media relations. And yet, public relations scholars adapted agenda building theory by focusing almost exclusively on news media relations, developing it as an antecedent to media agenda setting. And so the discipline oftentimes tests the theory using press releases or by examining how tweets affect news media. The connection between Foucault’s (1983) arguments of social networks and power/knowledge seem apparent. After all, many academic public relations programs are placed in mass communication or media departments across the United States. Therefore, scholarly work that attempts to examine newer media platforms often still ask if these newer platforms fit into older media roles; questions are not asked about whether the fundamental nature of the question is problematic. In other words, even though the scholarly community may be asking how Twitter shapes news coverage, the fundamental question is still testing a form of communication as though its sole agenda building ability is to be an antecedent to news coverage.

These findings help promote a call for the discipline to embrace its non-news-based roots. Public relations programs are designed to give their students immense tool kits by which to reach, engage with, and/or influence their publics. Much of the time, this is through methods that are not related to news media relations. How are organizations setting the agenda of publics directly through the use of their own media platforms? How are organizations setting the agenda of the NFL through non-media based means, such as league trainings and internal relations initiatives? I hope these findings help demonstrate how public relations agenda-building theory
can be expanded to many other aspects of the profession. If, as a discipline, we can combine the lessons from news-media-based agenda-building literature with findings from literature such as Cobb and Elder’s (1971) foundational development of the theory, a more holistic view of the profession will result. Practically, this broader conceptualization of the profession and the industry will allow scholars to diversify their own tool kit of methods when examining how organizations, third party-influencers, and others can shape the agendas of many different publics.

It is therefore my hope that, if anything is disruptive about these findings, it is disruptive in terms of posing a challenge to the public relations scholarly community. The challenge is multi-fold. These findings demonstrate how we as a community need to treat agendas more like publics, appreciating that there are as many different agendas as there are publics in any given instance. I hope these findings demonstrate how changing universalized agendas into binary agendas – such as mainstream versus queer or liberal versus conservative – is painting with a broad brush that still essentializes many individuals into homogenous groups. While practically speaking, the structure and limitations of academic conferences and journal articles may frown on such an appreciation of diversity within a scant few thousand words, I hope scholars can appreciate the limitations these structures may place on the field. While awareness for this diversity should at least awaken new conceptualizations of the theory and a broader base of methods from which to analyze this varied reality, perhaps others in the field can challenge the structure of how we determine what is knowledge and truth within the discipline.

It is my hope that these findings will therefore allow public relations scholars to sometimes live in a queerer version of reality than perhaps the current scholarship would otherwise allow.
Limitations and future research

There are, of course, some limitations to this study. This dissertation was limited in its ability to examine agenda-setting effects on audiences, though such a goal was not the primary aim of the study. While audience reaction was gauged through online communication activity and the use of public metrics, future scholarship may want to more specifically assess from where audiences are obtaining their news and information in the hybrid media system. Additionally, mapping these news and media consumption behaviors against an individual’s ideological views on topics such as queer sexualities would further illuminate patterns among media consumption, an individual’s views, and his or her sharing of opinions on media platforms.

While the study’s sample was open-ended in that it allowed for inclusion of any interacting media links or stories sourced within the initial selection of data, the studied content was still based in a pre-set selection of media outlets. Future scholarship should test this study’s theoretical developments using other methods that may be able to more broadly sample the media outlets involved in covering a particular story.

Finally, this dissertation was rooted in qualitative methods meant to explore how a specific story – Michael Sam’s NFL journey – developed and flowed throughout a hybrid media system. This study generated many additional questions, insights, and hypotheses that should be further developed in subsequent studies. While many developments were proposed, future scholarship needs to test these findings using more case examples. Quantitative scholars, in particular, may wish to test theoretical developments like information rippling to see if it similarly applies to other media cases or issues. This study also examined niche outlets by only
focusing on queer audiences, queer media outlets, and queer organizations. To examine whether these findings apply to other groups and circumstances, scholars should examine different niche communities and media outlets to see if these findings can be further developed in other contexts.

Concluding remarks

This dissertation offered an expansive look at how content ripples across a hybrid media system. By examining a singular case over the course of twelve months, this study was able to chart how many different organizations, individuals, and media platforms shape how various moments of a story are covered across media channels. Additionally, this study notably tackled a topic that had different dimensions of coverage within queer media outlets and discussions among queer advocacy groups and audiences. Findings demonstrated how there are many agendas occurring at any given time, each with its own unique characteristics.

While much previous scholarship has examined media agenda building as though it were a uni-directional flow, this study argues that the agenda-building process should be conceptualized in terms of information ripples. This is because there are many different actors, platforms, and organizations that are interacting with one another in the same theoretical pond. Each actor, organization or venue is able to create its own ripples and each is impacted by each other’s ripples. At times, each of these players may be able to make larger – and more influential – splashes within the pond, increasing its agenda-building abilities. At other times, players may be more susceptible to the agenda-building abilities of others. While future scholarship needs to test when these variances in ripple sizes occur, such a conceptualization of how information flows develop in the hybrid media system may better allow the academy to explore how the
theories of agenda building and agenda setting are operating as media platforms and channels continue to change.

This dissertation demonstrated how media relations and information subsidies go far beyond press releases or Twitter. Studies that only examine older or newer forms of public relations materials are arguably missing the broader landscape of the factors that affect a story’s media flow. Additionally, studies that only examine mainstream or niche media outlets may similarly be missing important dimensions to the agenda-building process. One of this study’s primary calls is for scholars to think more broadly about the individuals or media venues that can shape a story. Be it influential people like Ellen DeGeneres or salacious outlets like *TMZ*, many players need to be placed into the theoretical pond. Finally, this study calls for scholars to think about all of the non-news, and even non-media, forms of public relations agenda building that are more similar to the theory’s often behind-the-scenes political roots that were developed by Cobb and Elder (1971) decades ago. From relationship building to educational trainings, non-media aspects of public relations are a ripe area from which future scholarship can explore how the profession is shaping organizational, movement, or audience agendas.
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW MAPS

Consistent with proper interviewing techniques, interviews were semi-structured. The following is thus representative of the interview map that assisted the interviewer in preparation for each interview; therefore, many of the following questions were not asked, many questions were adapted, and many additional questions were included to adjust to the responses that were obtained as interviews progressed. The following maps thus show the main insights that were sought from interviews. Based on the unique nature of Mr. Artis Twyman’s role in the Michael Sam story, his interview – in particular – was more loosely adapted from the following interview maps.

For Communication Practitioners:

- Describe the major communication goals of your organization?
- Describe the major overall goals of your organization?
- What are the greatest challenges you face strategically as a communicator?
- What communication challenges does your organization face overall?
- Who are your key publics?
- How do you best reach these publics?
- What type of media do you focus on to reach these publics?
- How do you approach different types of media when attempting to reach different publics?
- What is your engagement like with your key publics? With journalists? With other important persons or organizations?
- How do you obtain news coverage around key issues – in particular, Michael Sam related topics?
- Which outlets do you find have been the most helpful to your cause? Least helpful? How do you decide how to promote various campaigns or responses?
- What type of discussions do you have internally about how to strategically frame your messages? Can you give me an example of how you tailored the frames of various campaigns or responses?
- What are your interactions like with journalists? What type of relationships are the most helpful? Least helpful?
- What variation is there, if any, between how you communicate with traditional media outlets, alternative media outlets, blogs, and your own, or other publics, through social media?
- Now, in regards to the Michael Sam story, or similar stories, please walk me through more specific examples of the above: How did you approach those stories? What media attention did you want to obtain? How did you frame this coverage? How did you go about obtaining this coverage? How else did you reach your key publics?
For Journalists and other Communication Professionals:

In addition to the questions above:
- How does your organization generally obtain information? Which sources do you seek out?
- What is your relationship with sources? How often do you rely on these sources? Do you sometimes rely on these sources more often than at other times? Why?
- How often do you quote these sources directly? Do you have other uses for sources, even if you do not cite them directly?
- Describe your information gathering process?
- Now, let’s talk about some of your specific coverage of the Michael Sam story-
  o Please walk me through how this story came to your attention?
  o When writing or broadcasting a story such as Sam’s, what ideals are important for you to think about?
  o Do you ever have concerns about information provided to you from sources?
  o Why did you cover the Sam story in such a manner?
  o How do you go about deciding how to portray or frame stories such as this?
  o What do you think the relationship should be between journalists and sources or journalists and public relations practitioners?
  o What type of feedback or interaction do you have with your sources after a story is printed or a broadcast is reported? What type of feedback or interaction do you have with your audiences after a story is printed or a broadcast is reported?
  o What did you think about the media coverage of Michael Sam, in general?
  o How would you describe the level of influence your outlet has on other news outlets? How has that changed, if at all, since you have been working there?
  o Looking back, what are your takeaways about Michael Sam’s journey over the course of 2014?
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