

Polarized Instagrammers fueled media coverage of NFL athlete activism

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Washington Redskins teammates during the national anthem before a game against the Oakland Raiders at FedExField on September 24, 2017 in Landover, Maryland. Credit: [Keith Allison](#)/Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

News media covered the National Football League national anthem protests more heavily on their Instagram accounts when readers' reactions to protest were more negative and more polarized, according to a University of Michigan study published in *Sport Management Review*.

This reader polarization on Instagram was triggered Sept. 22, 2017, when Donald Trump criticized the athletes who took a knee during the

national anthem.

Before that, the media's decision to cover the NFL anthem protests on Instagram was not responsive to reader interest and sentiment—but to user engagement (likes and comments) on the media's own Instagram account, said Wenche Wang, assistant professor of sport management at the U-M School of Kinesiology.

Wang and Stacy-Lynn Sant, also an assistant professor of kinesiology, co-authored a recent study that analyzed 496 official Instagram posts and 137,735 user comments to determine whether media actively modified their coverage of athlete protests in response to user interest and sentiment.

"(After Trump's comments), media were very sensitive to the differing views of those commenting on their Instagram posts," Wang said. "They were substantially more likely to post about President Trump's and other politicians' involvement in the protests when there was a large difference in user sentiment among their own readers."

Sant said Americans tend to be interested in sport-related topics whether or not they identify as fans of a particular athlete, sport or team.

"Athlete involvement in activism and the divisiveness of our politics has led to even more interest in what happens on and off the field," she said.

Before Sept. 22, 2017, media were more likely to cover the athlete protests on Instagram when they saw an increase in the number of comments on their Instagram accounts.

After Trump's criticism spotlighted the NFL athlete protests, readers became more interested and displeased with the protests, and likelier to discuss and debate the topic on [social media](#).

From the media's standpoint, such engagement on their [social media accounts](#), even with negative sentiment, could still be effective in increasing the popularity of the media, particularly because readers were more annoyed by the protests than with the media, the researchers said.

Wang was surprised by how media firms responded to the differing views of their readers.

"Research shows that media have an incentive to select [news content](#) that conform with readers' prior beliefs, and when there is a large degree of heterogeneity among readers, media would have less incentive to selectively report news or distort information," she said. "Our results actually suggest the opposite."

Interestingly, the increased coverage of the anthem issue on Instagram—despite social media users' differing opinions—conflicts with previous findings on bias in traditional media, Wang said.

Those studies suggest that [traditional media](#) may report information based on viewers' and the media firms' political stances, she said, which could be due to the different functions served by each media form: Television and print mediums deliver content, while social media fosters discussion and engagement.

The U-M study doesn't directly examine media bias, but the results find that media's decisions to cover the protests were distorted by consumer preferences, rather than being entirely objective and neutral, Wang said. This is consistent with previous research.

More information: Wenche Wang et al, A big data analysis of social media coverage of athlete protests, *Sport Management Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/14413523.2022.2051393](https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2022.2051393)

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