

# INTRODUCING A SPORTS MEDIA CONTENT ANALYSIS: DOES THE FREQUENCY OF POLITICAL CONTENT ALIGN WITH AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS?

Natalie Brown-Devlin

**After the completion of the [inaugural report](#)**, it was clear that for subsequent years, an additional component was needed to truly unpack the connection between politics and sports: a content analysis of sports media coverage. While the survey methodology allows for the understanding of how audiences *perceive* the connection between sports media and political content, a content analysis helps reveal how frequently political content is featured on sports media websites.

Overall, results showed that the connection between sports and politics is, perhaps, inseparable in sports media coverage, as ESPN featured political stories on their homepage 91 out of the overall 114 days ( $n = 79.8\%$ ) included in our analysis timeframe, and Yahoo Sports featured political stories on their homepage 96 days out of the overall 114 days ( $n = 84.2\%$ ) included in our analysis timeframe. These results suggest that the vast majority of days will feature some level of political content on these respective sports media websites. This result supports previous work that highlights that sports media viewers are incidentally [exposed to political content](#) through the sports media.

While results also seemed to show that both ESPN and Yahoo featured content that was political in nature similarly in frequency, the content topics they featured displayed some key differences between the two sports media brands. First, stories covering the development and controversy surrounding the LIV Golf Tour ranked, overall, as a top 3 story of 2022. This ranking was largely driven by Yahoo Sports' coverage, as the website featured a story about the LIV Golf Tour for 29 days of the analysis timeframe, and ESPN featured a story about the LIV Golf Tour for only 14 days of the analysis timeframe. Perhaps important to note here is that in 2022, the PGA Tour entered into a new 9-year agreement that would broadcast their PGA Tour Live on ESPN's [ESPN+ streaming service](#). Thus, ESPN would appear to have little motivation to provide frequent coverage to a potential rival to the PGA Tour.

Once the actual content on these sports websites was analyzed, it provided compelling context through which we can reanalyze the survey results. Overall, results showed that



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U.S. Flag at the University of Nebraska's Red-White Spring Game in April 2022

topics participants ranked fairly low in terms of their political nature primarily drove ESPN's coverage. ESPN's coverage was much more driven by articles pertaining to the business of sports, including sports team hiring practices, athlete contract negotiations, etc. Conversely, Yahoo Sports featured stories that participants deemed highly political more frequently than ESPN. Yahoo Sports showcased headlines pertaining to race, athlete advocacy, athlete protest policies, and corruption more frequently than ESPN.

Content analysis results also provided additional context through which we can analyze and interpret the qualitative survey data, as well. The Yahoo Sports homepage included stories related to the playing of the national anthem on only two days of our analysis timeframe and ESPN did not feature any headlines related to the playing of the national anthem. This result provides remarkable context given that word cloud results from Survey 1 visualized that participants continue to perceive national anthem protests to be salient when asked to consider the intersection between sports and politics. Clearly, the salience that exists in participants' minds persists regardless of a lack of media coverage. Other stories participants frequently recounted in survey data such as the World Cup, the Olympics, and Brittney Griner's arrest,

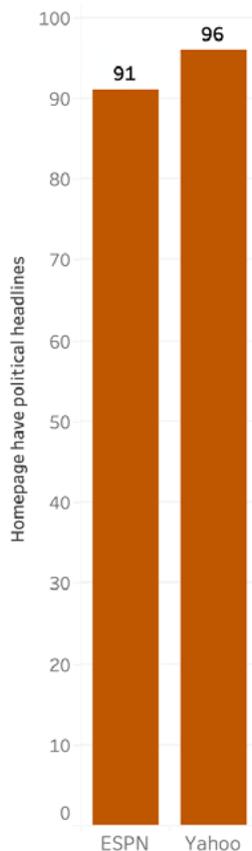
# CONTENT ANALYSIS

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**In order to examine** the political content featured by two top sports media brands, ESPN and Yahoo Sports, researchers content analyzed all headlines highlighted on the brands' homepages. A random date generator was used to derive a sample of 114 dates from January 1, 2022 to December 11, 2022. The list of dates that were utilized for analysis is included in an [Appendix A](#). After obtaining the dates, researchers utilized the Wayback Machine to capture the homepage of both ESPN.com and sports.yahoo.com for each respective date. Given that the Wayback Machine captures multiple versions of websites each day, researchers captured the first version that was logged after noon.

Researchers utilized the political content topics featured from Survey 1 to develop a codebook for analysis. This allowed researchers to determine the frequency of which sports media brands covered the topics participants perceived as "highly political" on their homepages. Each topic was coded with a binary "present" or "not present" code, which would tell researchers that the topic was, indeed, included on the homepage in some form on that respective day. It is important to note that the analysis was conducted to denote the presence or absence of a given topic on each day and a total frequency count of stories that may have been featured with that topic was not tallied.

## Political Story Included on Homepage



Overall, results determined that Yahoo Sports featured political stories on their homepage 96 days out of the overall 114 days examined (n = 84.2%) and ESPN featured political stories on their homepage 91 out of the overall 114 days examined (n = 79.8%). As such, Yahoo Sports included slightly more political content during the course of the year.

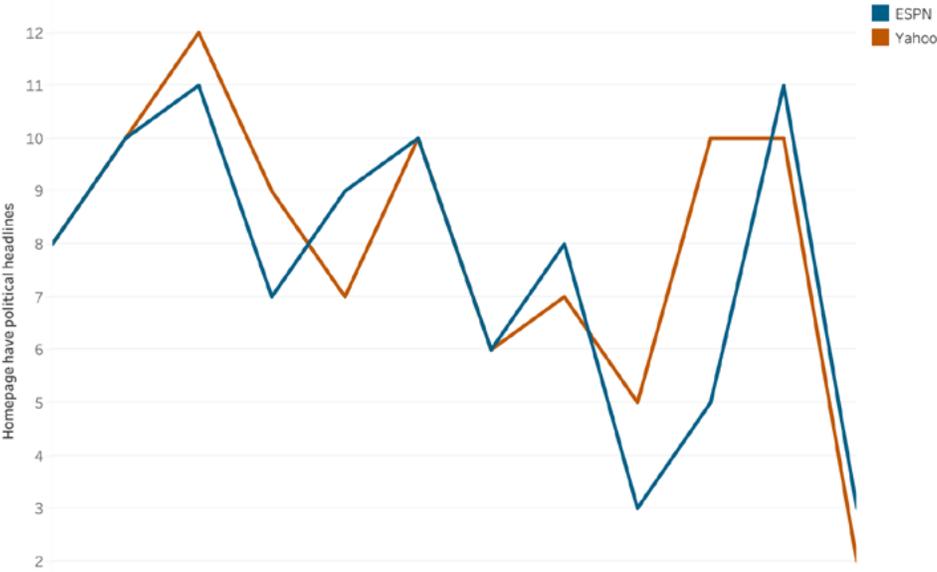


Logos for ESPN and Yahoo Sports

ESPN3, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons  
Yahoo!, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The researchers also analyzed the data by month for both Yahoo Sports and ESPN, determining that, for the most part, the two websites mirror one another’s editorial decisions, as the trend lines appear quite similar, overall. Both websites saw a peak in political content in March, with Yahoo featuring political stories on their homepage 12 days and ESPN featuring political stories for 11 days. March likely saw a higher frequency, as the month included many athlete contract negotiations in various sports. One month, in particular, saw a very different trend in the coverage of topics related to sports and politics: October. Yahoo Sports covered topics that were political in nature for 10 days of the analysis period and ESPN covered topics that were political in nature for only 5. Interestingly, while the two websites generally seemed to trend quite similarly in overall coverage of political topics, the topics covered varied widely, as Yahoo Sports led with stories that featured topics of race and the LIV Golf Tour. ESPN, on the other hand, featured stories mostly related to athlete contract negotiations and sports team hiring practices. Notably, when combined with results from Survey 1, Yahoo Sports seemed to feature stories that were deemed highly political by participants in the results from Survey 1 more frequently than ESPN, as they featured issues related to race, athlete advocacy, athlete protest policies, and corruption more frequently than ESPN. A table that highlights the frequency with which each topic was covered by ESPN and Yahoo Sports by month is also provided in [Appendix B](#).

**Political Story Included on Homepage**



Next, we examined the frequency of dates in which certain topics were featured on either homepage. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the topic featured most often on both websites included “Coverage of International Sports,” which included stories on the World Cup, Olympics, and other international sporting events. Next, the topic of sports team hiring practices was the second most frequently featured topic on both websites. This topic included any hiring change related to coaching staff, athletes, etc., and was understandably a topic frequently covered by the sports media. The third most frequently covered topic, overall, was the LIV Golf Tour, driven primarily by Yahoo Sports’ coverage.

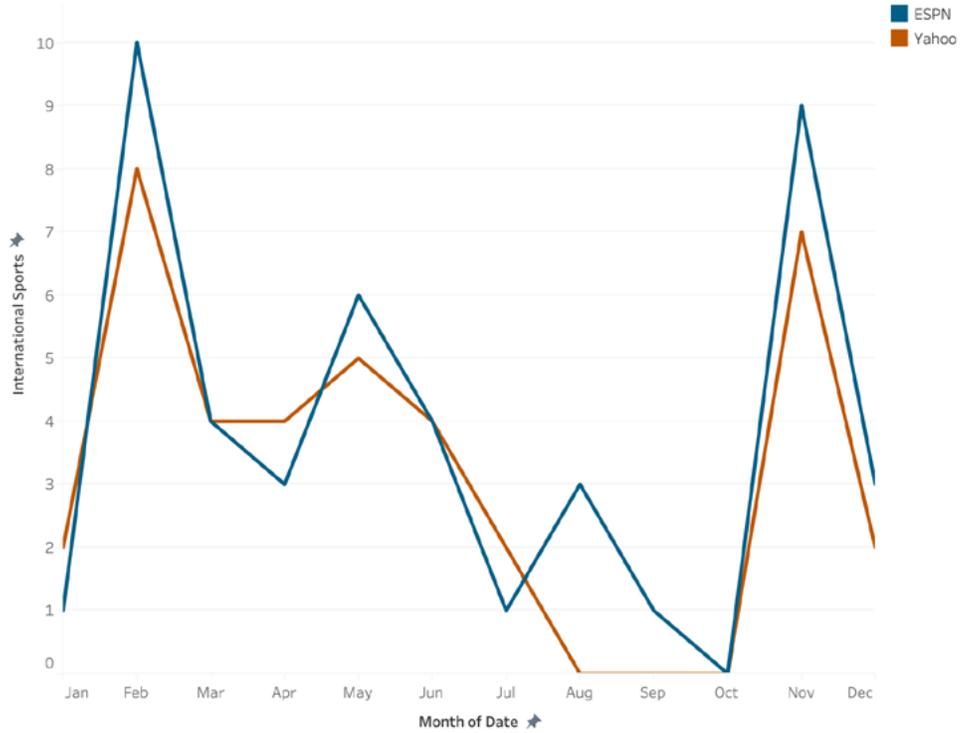
### Political Story Included on Homepage by Month

	ESPN	Yahoo	Total
Homepage have political headlines	91	96	187
Coverage of International Sports	45	38	83
Sports Team Hiring Practices	37	30	67
LIV Golf Tour	14	29	43
Professional Athlete Compensation	18	22	40
World Cup	20	16	36
Athlete Contract Negotiations	15	15	30
Race	9	21	30
Athlete Health/Safety Protocols	14	15	29
Gender	9	18	27
Olympics	13	10	23
Brittney Griner’s Detainment in Russia	8	9	17
Athlete Advocacy	5	12	17
Athlete Protest Policies	4	9	13
Athlete Uniform Policies	3	4	7
LGBTQ Issues	3	4	7
Corruption	1	5	6
NIL (Name, Image, Likeness)	3	2	5
Transgender Rights/Legislation	2	3	5
Athlete Drug Testing	2	2	4
Sport Team support of social causes	3	0	3
Olympic Skier Eileen Gu	2	1	3
Stadium Construction	2	1	3
Corporate Sponsorship	0	3	3
Former Athlete Running for Office	1	1	2
Sports Media Hiring Practices	1	1	2
Playing of National Anthem	0	2	2
Women’s Pay Equity	0	2	2
Kennedy v. Bremerton Case	1	0	1

Note, the following items were included in coding analysis, but were found not to be featured on either website during the year: “Advertising during sporting events,” “Dallas Cowboys partnership with Black Rifle Coffee Company,” “Military appreciation,” “Politician’s attendance at a sporting event,” “Sports team support of charities,” “sports reporter bias,” and “sustainability policies.” Thus, they were removed from analysis charts to conserve space. A monthly breakdown of the topics included on each website is included in [Appendix B](#).

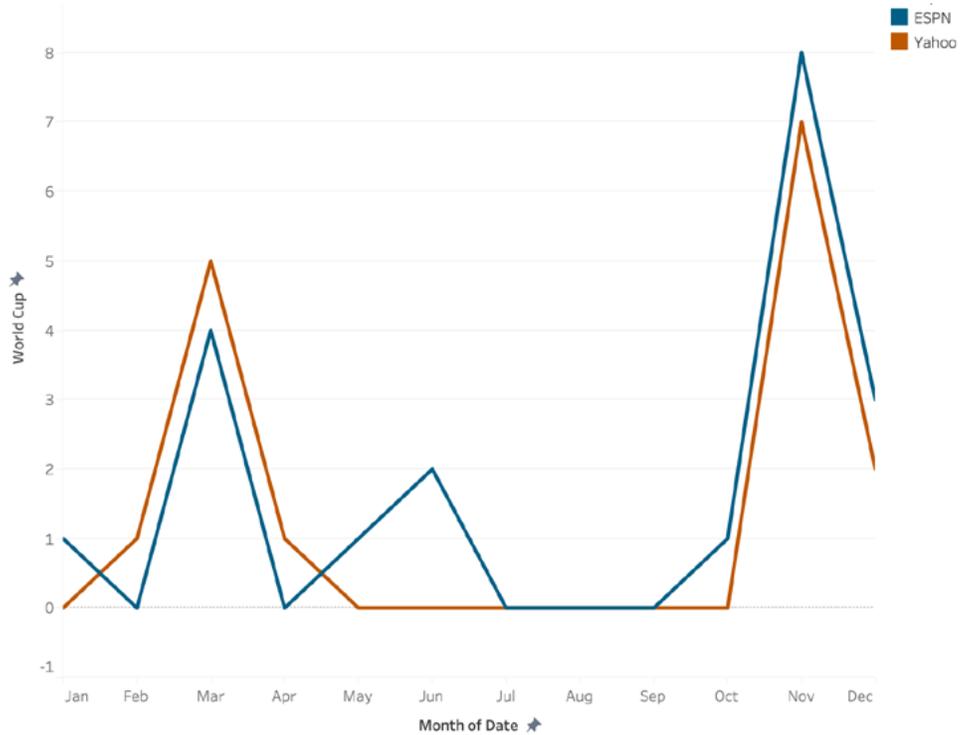
Results showcased that the World Cup received more coverage in 2022 than the Olympics, which is understandable given that the event occurred later in the year. When broken down by month, it is clear that coverage of the World Cup also included qualifying matches and other team and event-related news leading up to the event. When examining coverage of all international sporting events, it’s, again, clear that the Olympics and World Cup drove the headlines for 2022. (Note: Due to publication timelines, the entire month of December was unable to be included for analysis, which likely explains the November to December decrease despite the fact that the World Cup was still occurring).

## International Sports Stories by Month



The trend of sum of International Sports for Date Month. Color shows details about Yahoo/ESPN.

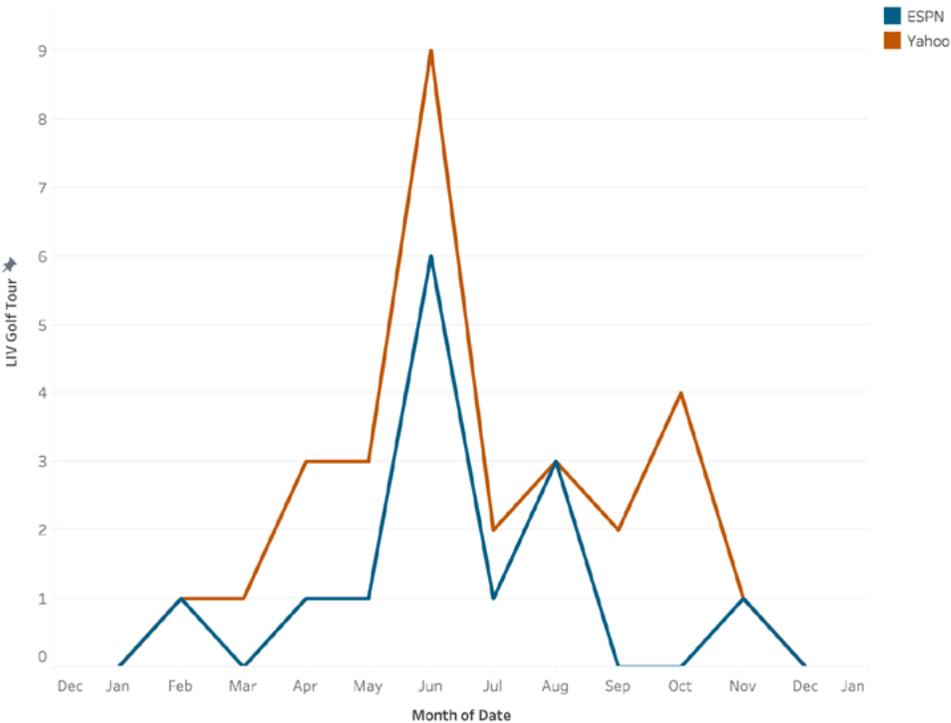
## World Cup Story Frequency



The trend of sum of World Cup for Date Month. Color shows details about Yahoo/ESPN.

As previously mentioned, the coverage around the development of the LIV Golf Tour was ranked in the top 3 overall in terms of coverage frequency. When broken down by month, it is clear that the coverage was consistently driven by Yahoo Sports, rather than ESPN. Perhaps important to note is that the PGA Tour does maintain a relationship with ESPN, as the tour entered into a 9-year deal with ESPN in 2022 to move [PGA Tour Live to the ESPN+](#) streaming platform.

### LIV Golf Stories by Month



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