

Deflated: The Strategic Impact of the “Deflategate” Scandal on the NFL and its Golden Boy

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Abstract

In January 2015, the Indianapolis Colts informed the National Football League of suspicion of ball deflation by the New England Patriots in a playoff game. What followed was a multi-year battle between the NFL, a “model” franchise, and one of the league’s most polarizing players, Tom Brady. This case study details what would affectionately become *Deflategate* through the lens of agenda setting and primarily image restoration theories and contains an analysis of the public relations process.

Keywords: NFL; Deflategate; Tom Brady; New England Patriots; image restoration; agenda setting

Introduction

Not. Another. Scandal. Football fans across the country could almost hear those words coming from National Football League Commissioner Roger Goodell’s mouth moments after the “Deflategate” scandal broke in January 2015.

Goodell and the NFL had barely recovered from the 2014 Rice video and its aftermath—which included strengthening the league’s domestic

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violence policy, promising to better educate its players about domestic violence, suspending Rice (who was released by the Baltimore Ravens Sept. 8, the same day TMZ released the video of him hitting his then-fiancée, Janay, so hard that she lost consciousness) and donating \$5 million a year for five years to the National Domestic Violence Hotline and about \$3.5 million to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center from 2014 to 2015 – when the Indianapolis Colts played the New England Patriots in Gillette Stadium for the AFC Championship on Jan. 18, 2015.

Hours after the Patriots' 45-7 victory, WTHR's Bob Kravitz typed the tweet heard 'round the league: *"Breaking: A league source tells me the NFL is*

Scandals During NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell's Tenure

Since taking the helm at the nation's most popular—and most profitable—professional sports organization, Goodell had already steered “the shield” through:

- **“Spygate”**—when the New England Patriots' employees videotaped the New York Jets' defensive coaches' signals Sept. 9, 2007, from a stadium location that was unauthorized. This forced him to levy the league's biggest fine ever for an individual -- \$500,000 – on Patriots coach Bill Belichick only a year after becoming the commissioner;
- **“Bountygate”**—when New Orleans Saints' personnel allegedly paid bonuses to players for deliberately injuring opposing players between 2009 and 2011. Goodell suspended the general manager, players and coaches, including head coach Sean Payton, who was barred from the team for the entire 2012 season. The commissioner also fined the team and forced the Saints to forfeit second-round draft picks in 2012 and 2013;
- **Concussion settlement** of \$765 million to more than 18,000 retired players in 2013, accompanied by rule changes and new concussion protocols;
- And the infamous **Ray Rice video** in 2014, which propelled the league to stiffen the penalties for players who committed domestic violence. Prior to the Rice incident, Goodell had issued suspensions totaling only 13 games for the 56 domestic violence incidents that had happened in his tenure.

investigating the possibility the Patriots deflated footballs Sunday night. More to come.”

Goodell had no idea this latest scandal would last two years, take him through U.S. District Court and the U.S. Court of Appeals – and nearly to the U.S. Supreme Court – and run the league, the commissioner and the Patriots through the social media wringer, which more easily allowed each party – including NFL fans – to set the agenda on Deflategate.

The commissioner also had no idea that Deflategate would test the relationship between the “mother ship” and one of its preeminent satellites, including his close personal relationship with Patriots owner Robert Kraft.

Finally, Goodell had no idea he would be vehemently defending the integrity of the league’s competition all while Kraft and the Patriots’ players and staff would be vehemently denying any wrongdoing and seeking to salvage any positive image the team may have remaining.

Background

Deflategate Timeline

On January 17, 2015, Indianapolis Colts General Manager Ryan Grigson sent an email to the NFL expressing his concern about the air pressure in the New England Patriots’ footballs (CSN Staff, n.d.). Attached to the email was a message from the Colts’ equipment manager Sean Sullivan that read:

It is well known around the league that after the Patriots game balls are checked by the officials and brought out for game usage the ball boys for the Patriots will let out some air with a ball needle because their quarterback likes a smaller football so he can grip it better. It would be great if someone would be able to check the air in the game balls as the game goes on so that they don’t get an illegal advantage. (CSN Staff, n.d.)

Sullivan’s concern traces back to the Patriots’ win over the Colts on November 16, 2014, when Mike Adams, a Colts safety, intercepted two passes from Tom Brady then gave the footballs to Indianapolis’ assistant

equipment manager, Brian Seabrooks (CSN Staff, n.d.). Sullivan and Seabrooks inspected both footballs and realized that the balls were “tacky, spongy and soft when squeezed” (CSN Staff, n.d.).

The day following Grigson’s email to the NFL, the New England Patriots defeated the Indianapolis Colts in the AFC Game 45-6 (ESPN.com, 2016). During halftime of the AFC championship game, officials replaced the 12 balls that were used in the first half with 12 backup balls that had been approved before game time (ESPN.com, 2016). After the game, Bob Kravitz, an Indianapolis journalist, reported that the NFL was starting an investigation to determine if there was intentional manipulation of the air pressure in the Patriots’ footballs (Flynn, 2016). Newsday reported on January 20, 2015 that Colts linebacker D’Qwell Jackson thought the football was abnormal after he intercepted a Brady pass, and his team’s equipment staff checked the ball and found it to be underinflated (ESPN.com, 2016). Chris Mortensen reported on ESPN that all but one of the 12 footballs used in the first half of the game were notably underinflated (ESPN.com, 2016).

Patriots head coach Bill Belichick held a news conference on January 22 during which he “denied knowledge of deflated footballs,” and Brady said he would “never do anything to break the rules” (Around the NFL Staff, 2016). Brady also told reporters that he did not have the slightest knowledge of deflated footballs, nor did he know of any type wrongdoing (CSN Staff, n.d.). The NFL released a statement the following day announcing that NFL general counsel Jeff Pash and New York attorney Ted Wells would lead the investigation (ESPN.com, 2016). Within five days of the AFC championship game nearly 40 interviews of Patriots personnel, game officials and relevant experts were conducted that heavily contributed to the evidence that the Patriots used underinflated footballs (Flynn, 2016).

Four months after the investigation began, Wells released his findings on May 6 and concluded that footballs were underinflated by Patriots’ personnel and that Brady’s claim that he did not have any knowledge of such acts was unlikely (Flynn, 2016). Further, the Wells report stated Jim McNally, the officials’ locker room attendant, and John Jastremski, an equipment assistant, intentionally deflated the game balls between the examination of the balls by a referee and the start of the game (Flynn,

2016). In the aftermath of the report, the NFL announced on May 11 that Brady was suspended without pay for the first four games of the upcoming season, the team was to pay a \$1 million fine, the Patriots were to lose “their first-round draft pick of 2016 and fourth-round pick for 2017, and McNally and Jastremski...were suspended indefinitely without pay” (Flynn, 2016).

By May 12, the Patriots refuted the Wells report point by point, posting the rebuttal online (ESPN.com, 2016). Two days later, the NFL Players Association filed an appeal on Brady’s behalf (Flynn, 2016). For the next several days, reports surfaced that the Patriots and the NFL were having “back channel conversations” (ESPN.com, 2016) to resolve the differences before the team appealed or went through litigation (ESPN.com, 2016). When those discussions failed, Brady appealed his suspension (Goodell did not recuse himself from the hearing) on June 23 (Around the NFL Staff, 2016). Brady’s suspension was upheld on July 28 (Flynn, 2016), and Goodell wrote in the ruling that “Brady instructed his assistant to destroy the cell phone that he had been using since early November 2014, a period that included the AFC Championship game and the initial weeks of the subsequent investigation” (Around the NFL Staff, 2016). The report further stated that Brady told his assistant to destroy the phone on the very day he was interviewed by Wells (Around the NFL Staff, 2016).

By August 2015, the Deflategate case had gone to arbitration, with a federal judge encouraging both parties to settle (Around the NFL Staff, 2016). Both sides were back in court by August 31, and on September 3, Judge Richard M. Berman nullified Brady’s four-game suspension (Around the NFL Staff, 2016). One of Berman’s key points was that Brady did not receive the proper advance notice to be disciplined by the NFL and information of the kind of penalties he could receive (Around the NFL Staff, 2016). The NFL appealed Berman’s decision in an appeals brief filed with the U.S. Second Circuit Court of Appeals on October 26, and on December 7, the NFL Players Association filed “a 73-page appeals brief in response to the NFL’s brief” (Around the NFL Staff, 2016).

A three-judge panel from the U.S. Second Circuit Court of Appeals heard arguments from both sides on March 23, 2016 (Around the NFL Staff, 2016), and the court reinstated Brady’s four-game suspension on April 25 (Flynn, 2016). The U.S. Second Circuit Court of Appeals denied Brady’s

motion to rehear his case on July 13, and two days later, Brady announced via a Facebook post that he would not appeal to the Supreme Court (Flynn, 2016).

Football Inflation Rules Evolve

Before 2006, home teams in the NFL typically provided footballs for the game. In 2006, Tom Brady and Peyton Manning, quarterbacks for the New England Patriots and the Indianapolis Colts, respectively, asked the league to change the rule and allow each team to provide footballs that were more tailored to the individual quarterbacks' liking. Brady said in a November 28, 2006, article by Abe Rakov in the Sun-Sentinel: "The thing is, every quarterback likes it a little bit different. Some like them blown up a little bit more, some like them a little more thin, some like them a little more new, some like them really broken in." The two argued that new footballs have a slick coating that makes them difficult to grip when wet. Under the rules adopted in 2006, the coating could be scrubbed off but the balls had to pass inspection by NFL officials (Rakov, 2006).

The air pressure in footballs, per NFL rules dating back to 1940, should be between 12.5 and 13.5 PSI. The rules prior to Deflategate also stated that the "balls shall remain under the supervision of the Referee until they are delivered to the ball attendant just prior to the start of the game," according to Rule 2. But, in this AFC title game, referee Walt Anderson lost the footballs for the first time in his career (Florio, 2015), which was not significant until the Colts' D'Qwell Jackson intercepted a Brady pass and gave the ball to the Indianapolis equipment staff to check (ESPN.com, 2016). This led to all the footballs being rechecked and re-inflated at halftime and sparked the Deflategate investigation (Florio, 2015).

Following Deflategate, the NFL changed inflation rules and ball security measures. Two hours and 15 minutes prior to kickoff, each team has to supply 24 footballs to the referees (NFL, 2017). Diligently, the referees inspect and record the PSI of each football (NFL, 2017). To meet regulation, footballs must be 13.0 PSI (Lorenzo, 2015). Similar to players having different rituals, each referee has a unique stamp of approval that indicates the football has passed inspection (Lorenzo, 2015). The inspection process is not only to keep tabs on the teams but also the referees to eliminate any favoritism. Once the game balls are approved by

the referee, the K-Ball Coordinator takes custody of the footballs and is responsible for them until 10 minutes before kickoff (NFL.com, n.d.). At that time the K-Ball Coordinator, a designated game official and an NFL security representative take the balls to the replay station and distribute them to each team's ball crew (NFL.com, n.d.). All backup balls remain in the officials' locker room and are secured to the referee's satisfaction (NFL.com, n.d.).

The NFL's Most Hated Model Franchise

The Patriots have many elements NFL teams want: an excellent quarterback, a winning record and several Super Bowl titles. But it was not always this way. In January 1991, the Patriots were the NFL's least valuable team at only \$100 million, and the 1990 team, which went 1-15, had been voted by a USA Today poll as the "worst team of all time," surpassing even the winless 1976 Tampa Bay Buccaneers, (Bird, 2016).

In a year already filled with challenges, the Patriots drew even more attention to themselves and the organization when tight end Zeke Mowatt and two other players were accused by Boston Herald reporter Lisa Olson of sexually harassing her in the locker room on September 17, 1990. The NFL fined Mowatt \$12,500 for his alleged involvement in the incident, but the organization was placed in an even more negative spotlight when then-owner Victor Kiam called Olson a "classic bitch," and fans harassed her by slashing her tires, sending her hate mail and burglarizing her apartment (Ricchiardi, 2005). But, when savvy businessman Robert Kraft purchased the team for a then-record \$175 million in 1994, he saw potential (Bird, 2016). His vision and determination led to a wildly successful franchise that has won five Super Bowls and is now valued at \$3.2 billion (Bird, 2016).

The jealousy felt by the other NFL teams and the hatred by NFL fans stem from the team's success but is elevated by numerous scandals that have involved the Patriots. Still, winning consistently and earning five Lombardi trophies manage to overshadow Patriot wrongdoings. While Pats fans remain loyal and rabidly support their team, not all NFL fans agree. In a recent public poll, Brady was cited as the most-liked field captain in the NFL (Rovell, 2017). Despite being the most-liked field captain, Brady was also cited as the most-hated quarterback in the league (Rovell, 2017).

Michael Powell (2015) said it best when he said Tom Brady is a perfect and telegenic exemplar of [the] league, and for his talents and his preternatural ease, he has become terrifically wealthy. The hate toward the Patriots and Tom Brady may be a unique form of jealousy. In the same poll referenced above, the Patriots were named the most-hated NFL team for the second straight year, and 34 percent of those surveyed viewed Belichick negatively (Rovell, 2017). Despite these negative perceptions, Kraft, the Patriots, Belichick and Brady have developed a winning football team.

To complicate matters, Kraft and Commissioner Goodell have been close friends since Goodell became the commissioner. Technically, Kraft and his fellow owners are Goodell's bosses, so the relationship has been much cozier than most employees have with their employers. Kraft was one of Goodell's strongest supporters when he was tapped to replace Paul Tagliabue, and he stayed in Goodell's corner when he earned a new contract in 2010. In 2013, Kraft told ESPN's "Outside the Lines" that Goodell "really runs the NFL like he owns it and thinks like an owner."

The relationship is a tenuous one, however. Although Goodell works for the owners, he also punishes the players, teams and owners when they break league rules. For instance, Goodell punished the Patriots after Spygate, and he again punished Kraft and his team for Deflategate. The Patriots lost a first-round draft pick in 2016 and a fourth-round draft pick in 2017, were fined \$1 million, and Brady served a four-game suspension (Vergara, 2017). Additionally, Goodell is the judge, jury and appellate judge when teams and players face punishment. He not only handed out the Patriots' penalties, but he heard Brady's initial appeal of his suspension.

In the wake of Deflategate, however, it appears that the friendship has changed, and Patriotswire on USA Today reported that Kraft said, "I don't know if it will ever be the same, but in order to do what is best for the Patriots franchise long term, I believe it is best to compartmentalize and move on". Like our quarterback, I am trying to remain positive and look to the future rather than dwell on the past. As a native New Englander, that's easier said than done, but I am doing my best to put the matter behind me" (McKenna, 2017). Goodell said recently that the scandal was water under the bridge. He said Deflategate was "nothing personal" (McKenna,

2017). However, the complicated system, and the relationships therein, creates a murky connection.

Stakeholders

While systems theory is not a critical dynamic of our analysis, it is important to remember that the connection between the NFL (the organization) and each NFL team is unique. Organizations function as complex organisms. As open social systems, it is imperative that organizations share information to achieve maximum effectiveness. Often, organizations have no choice but to achieve a cohesive information-sharing system to fulfill internal tasks, coordinate diverse activities and interpret the external environment (Daft & Lengel, 1986). If organizations share information effectively and efficiently, then challenges that typically lead to uncertainty and distrust may be avoided.

Thus, the NFL, as a living, breathing combination of stakeholder groups, is nothing short of a phenomenal system. Within the NFL, the corporation, media, owners, coaches, players, and fans often have competing desires. Deflategate began as an instance of information-sharing between internal stakeholder groups. What ensued was a massive systemic organizational sharing failure that perpetuated animosity and distrust between parties.

The New England Patriots have an outspoken owner, Robert Kraft, who has, in the past, been a staunch advocate of NFL Commissioner Rodger Goodell. Unfortunately, despite the team's success under Kraft, there have been an inordinate number of negative story lines related to the team's practices that have presented the Golden Boy, Tom Brady, and the organization as cheaters. The Patriots throughout Deflategate, stand in sharp contrast to the NFL, an organization concerned with the bottom-line and an organization that has been laden with other prevalent issues (domestic violence, concussions, etc.).

Theoretical Framework

Deflategate was fraught with public relations fury from all sides. To analyze the efforts of the New England Patriots and the NFL, agenda setting and primarily image restoration theories will be used to provide a framework for understanding strategic communication decisions. What

follows is a brief overview of each theoretical framework and specific actions made by each stakeholder group that fall into theory categories.

Agenda Setting

The ability, or in this case inability, of the NFL and the New England Patriots to find a solution drove a media firestorm. The league already experienced significant public outrage due in part to the league response to issues related to domestic assault and head injuries and the Deflategate extravaganza, which featured Tom Brady, the league's Golden Boy, was just the latest in a series of missteps. As the system tried to stay afloat, media outlets perpetuated the dispute.

Agenda setting refers, primarily, to the correlation between the emphasis placed by mass media on certain topics and the ensuing importance attributed to these issues by the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Further, agenda setting is concerned with message construction rather than media effects (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The media construction of the Deflategate phenomena was a fascinating display of messaging.

The media can drive public opinion in certain cases by emphasizing some issues over others. Issues that receive media attention can increase overall public concern for messages distributed for public consumption (McCombs 2004; Sheaffer, 2007). Deflategate, caused a media frenzy and perpetuated stereotypes of the NFL, the New England Patriots and Tom Brady.

The agenda-setting theory, now more than 50 years old, has taken on new meaning with social media. At its core, agenda setting measures the impact of the media's agenda "on the public agenda regarding the salience of issues, political figures and other objects of attention" (McCombs, Shaw and Weaver, 2014). Because the media select and portray prominently and frequently certain stories, people are led to believe that those issues are more important than others (Wu and Coleman, 2009).

In a paper McCombs and Weaver presented in 1973 to the International Communication Association, the two wrote:

At the psychological level, our major theoretical assertion is that every individual has a need for orientation. Each individual feels

some need to be familiar with his surrounds, both his physical and cognitive environment.

Although Deflategate is certainly not a public interest story, it was very much of interest to the public, thanks largely to social media. The story broke via Twitter, and it grew through social media, with everyone from journalists to teams to fans to the NFL weighing in on the topic. And while the average person could have gone through his or her day without knowing much about the issue, Deflategate was conversational currency.

Bernard Cohen (1963) stated the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13). With social media, the public had a variety of stories and statements bombarding their accounts. The Deflategate story became important because the story was inescapable – from traditional media to social media, nearly every outlet (from Good Morning America to ESPN) covered Deflategate.

Unfortunately, what is perpetuated in the media is not always accurate. McCombs and Shaw (1972) found that the “news media do have a point of view, sometimes extreme biases” (p. 184). Of course, this is magnified in social media where each outlet, player, team, fan or even the league could offer a viewpoint on the story. Traditional media outlets – even on their social media accounts and their reporters’ social media accounts – remained objective, but the teams and the league had direct-to-the-consumer outlets in social media platforms and made sure to tell their own versions of the story. Thus, we recognize that this effort to frame issues in a manner desirable to an organization is particularly relevant to public relations efforts, especially in cases in which there are multiple actors attempting to simultaneously frame the same issue (Seltzer and Dittmore, 2009).

Technology has allowed a shift “to an environment in which anyone can produce ‘news’ and social media influence our understanding of the world” (Mayer and Cornfield, 2008; Conway, et. al., 2015, p. 363). Metzger and Marrugi (2009) further suggest social media can circulate information “without having to rely on traditional media to act as a gatekeeper or fact-checker or moderator” (p. 152). Many sports fans get news directly from a league’s, a team’s or a player’s social media. Further, athletes from

professional golf and the NFL used Twitter more than athletes from any other sports, according to Pegoraro's (2010) study.

In an effort to control the flow of media information and set the agenda for public consumption, the NFL provided two prominent NFL journalists (Chris Mortensen of ESPN and Peter King of MMQB) with false information. While ESPN never disregarded the inaccurate reporting, Peter King did issue an apology for the misinformation. Further, Dan Wetzel of Yahoo traced the NFL role in promoting what he calls an "anti-Patriots" public sentiment via media and NFL outlets. Wetzel points out several media-inconsistencies or obstacles that promoted anti-New England sentiment to drive public opinion. The story did not gain substantial traction until ESPN reported, about 24 hours after the game, that the NFL had discovered that 11 of the 12 footballs were measured to be more than 2 pounds per square inch below the league minimum of 12.5. ESPN later reported that the subject was not true, see Mortenson/King above, yet the report grew in importance according to public reaction. Wetzel (2015) also says this in his expose:

Once it appeared the Patriots were up to something big then the public and media rightfully demanded a serious investigation into what wasn't that serious of a story. Goodell didn't steer this to the truth and away from the heated condemnation of a signature player and the validity of a Super Bowl participant (and soon champion). He instead commissioned Wells' report, lending credence to a false narrative. Abdicating his authority to Wells led to the build-up for the report, which allowed a pack of Manhattan lawyers to serve as the cops, judge and jury. (para. 11-12)

The New England Patriots, on the other hand, tried a variety of methods to influence public opinion. Obviously, the denial of any wrong-doing perpetuated the fundamental Patriots supporters. However, the unwavering support of Robert Kraft for Tom Brady, and Kraft's consistent victim and challenge rhetoric against the NFL, presented a different side of the argument. For example, on May 11, 2015, ESPN reporter Adam Schefter tweeted Kraft's statement regarding Deflategate:

Statement from Patriots' owner Robert Kraft:

"Despite our conviction that there was no tampering with footballs, it was our intention to accept any discipline levied by the league.

Today's punishment, however, far exceeded any reasonable expectation. It was based completely on circumstantial rather than hard or conclusive evidence."

"We are humbled by the support the New England Patriots have received from our fans throughout the world. We recognize our fans' concerns regarding the NFL's penalties and share in their disappointment in how this one-sided investigation was handled, as well as the dismissal of the scientific evidence supported by the Ideal Gas Law in the final report."

"Tom Brady has our unconditional support. Our belief in him has not wavered."

The statement presented above was released by Kraft following the announcement of Brady's four-game suspension for the 2015 season (which would ultimately be postponed because of legal action until the 2016 season). Kraft, in an effort to present the media with an alternative perspective, emphasized the "one-sided investigation," the punishment that "far exceeded any reasonable expectation" and the "dismissal of scientific evidence" regarding the ball's air pressure. The themes in this statement, including the victimization of Tom Brady by the NFL and the egregious punishment that Kraft would argue did not fit the crime, became tenants of his campaign against the shield.

If the hierarchy of effects theory is applied to agenda setting, then the first level "corresponds to an issue or figure gaining the public's attention and then the public learning about it" (Wu and Coleman, p. 777). The first level tells the news audience what to think about. The second level of agenda setting occurs when people form impressions of a person or an issue based on presented attributes. This means second-level agenda setting advocates that media tell the news audience how to think about a story or issue (Golan and Wanta, 2001).

As Bryan Denham (2013) stated in "From Coverage to Recovery: Mediating the Fallen Sports Celebrity," journalists make choices about what details they "emphasize in news reports with news audiences then drawing conclusions based on those attributes" (p. 39). With Deflategate, reporters could choose to include any number of details. Such selections could then cause the reader or viewer to believe that Brady orchestrated ball deflation intentionally, or that others within the Patriots' organization

acted independently of Brady and decided to alter the balls because they thought it would be helpful, or that Mother Nature somehow caused ball pressure to drop below the league's standards.

Each side, the NFL and the Patriots/Tom Brady, attempted to control the narrative. The NFL emphasized the integrity of the game, the repeated Patriot offenses, and the investigation as primary arguments for wrongdoing and this message became an unwavering foundation for the NFL. On the other hand, the Patriots used victim-language, criticized an unfair investigation, and used rhetoric that positioned New England and Tom Brady as the marginalized population. While we believe agenda setting was present through the Deflategate saga, we also recognize that the manifestation of agenda setting was not what many would deem as a primary concern for strategic communication scholars and practitioners. Instead, it is a helpful lens to consider media impact on a story that seems insignificant, at first.

Image Restoration

We know that the NFL and the New England Patriots, as well as Tom Brady, have been entangled in a public relations catastrophe. Each stakeholder was presented to the public as a dysfunctional member of the system either by media or other stakeholder groups and, as such, each stakeholder faced the task of achieving a positive image restoration. However, for this analysis, the image restoration of Brady, the primary offender, is most intriguing. Benoit (1997) outlined five strategies of image restoration discourse. Specifically, Benoit (1997) believed image restoration could consist of denial (simple or shifting the blame), evasion of responsibility (provocation, defeasibility, accident, good intentions), the reduction of the offensiveness of the event (bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, and compensation), corrective action (plan to solve or prevent the problem) and, finally, mortification (apologize for the act).

While image restoration may go beyond the five categories Benoit (1997) described, it is important nonetheless to see the transition of damaged images from denial to mortification. Part of what makes the Deflategate scenario so fascinating is that both the "offender" (Brady/New England Patriots) and the "offended" (NFL) went through an image restoration

process as neither party was blameless in the eyes of the public. However, what follows for our purposes is an overview of the five categories of image restoration and examples of how Brady exhibited each dimension.

In simple and summative terms, **denial** involves denying that the act occurred or that a party was involved in the act. In Brady's case, denial became a routine occurrence. To help clarify and present each stage in a more concrete way, we have included media examples of the stage in question. For Brady, denial occurred as a means of "denying" that the original act occurred and by magnifying a shifting of blame. When the story first broke, Brady had this to say about his involvement in deflating footballs:

"I didn't alter the ball in any way. I have a process I go through before every game where I go in and pick the balls — the footballs that I want to use for the game. Our equipment guys do a great job of breaking the balls in. They have a process that they go through. When I pick those footballs out, at that point, to me, they're perfect. I don't want anyone touching the balls after that, I don't want anyone rubbing them, putting any air in, taking any air out, to me those balls are perfect and that's what I expect when I'm on the field."

Obviously, this was a clear denial from Brady and an attempt to deflect information from himself to the equipment crew and even to the process. Additional members of the Patriots, Robert Kraft (owner) and Bill Belichick (coach) also were quick to deny any knowledge or involvement in the football deflation.

The second dimension, **evasion of responsibility**, was exhibited by Brady in a few instances. The subcategories during the evading responsibility phase include provocation, accident, defeasibility and good intentions. During this phase, the offender, in this case Brady, would take responsibility while pointing to extenuating circumstances to justify the act. With that said, Brady never did take responsibility, but he was quick to offer "justifications" for the deflation.

The Wells Report did indicate that it was "more probable than not" that Brady was at least "generally" aware that the game balls were being deflated. This is simply a non-committal way of saying that Brady

probably at least knew about the deflation, whether or not he actually instructed equipment managers to let air out of the footballs. However, Brady, reinforced that he had "...no knowledge of anything. [I have] no knowledge of any wrongdoing...". During the evasion of responsibility phase, other sources, like Professor Michael Naughton, chair of the physics department at Boston College, offered other reasons for deflation. Naughton, in a news release by BC, said "*It's not possible for weather not to have played a role.*" Brady refused to acknowledge that the footballs were deflated; he even refused to acknowledge that weather, or other outside influences, could have been a factor. By denying the deflation from the beginning of the process and allowing experts like Naughton to speak out about outside factors, Brady continued to distance himself from the issue.

Reducing offensiveness, the third category of Benoit's (1997), was displayed by Brady through his specific minimization of the event, bolstering in his status as an upstanding NFL player and his attacks of the accuser. Bolstering involves describing or reinforcing positive characteristics, while minimization consists of reframing an act to make it seem less important. Attacking the accuser (the NFL) involves questioning the credibility of the accuser and/or the allegation.

In one instance, to minimize the issue, Brady compared Deflategate to ISIS. He said, "*I'm okay. Things are going to be fine. This isn't ISIS. No one's dying.*" By minimizing the big picture impact on Deflategate, and by bringing to the forefront a devastating international issue, Brady attempted to minimize his involvement and Deflategate. Brady also routinely reminded the public of his record as a rule-follower. By bolstering his image, Brady tried to distance himself from the possibility of cheating. In one interview, with NBC's Peter Alexander, Tom Brady said "*I feel like I've always played within the rules. I would never do anything to break the rules. I believe in fair play, and I respect the league and everything they're doing to try to create a very competitive playing field for all the NFL teams.*" Throughout the process, Brady routinely attempted to master a positive image.

To reduce offensiveness, Brady also attacked his accuser (in this case, the NFL). Brady's Facebook, which has more than 4.3 million "Likes," presented several direct quotes from Brady that reinforced his disbelief and disappointed surrounding the entire Deflategate issue, especially the

punishment and procedure used by the NFL. Figure 1 shows one such post on his Facebook page (Duran, 2016).

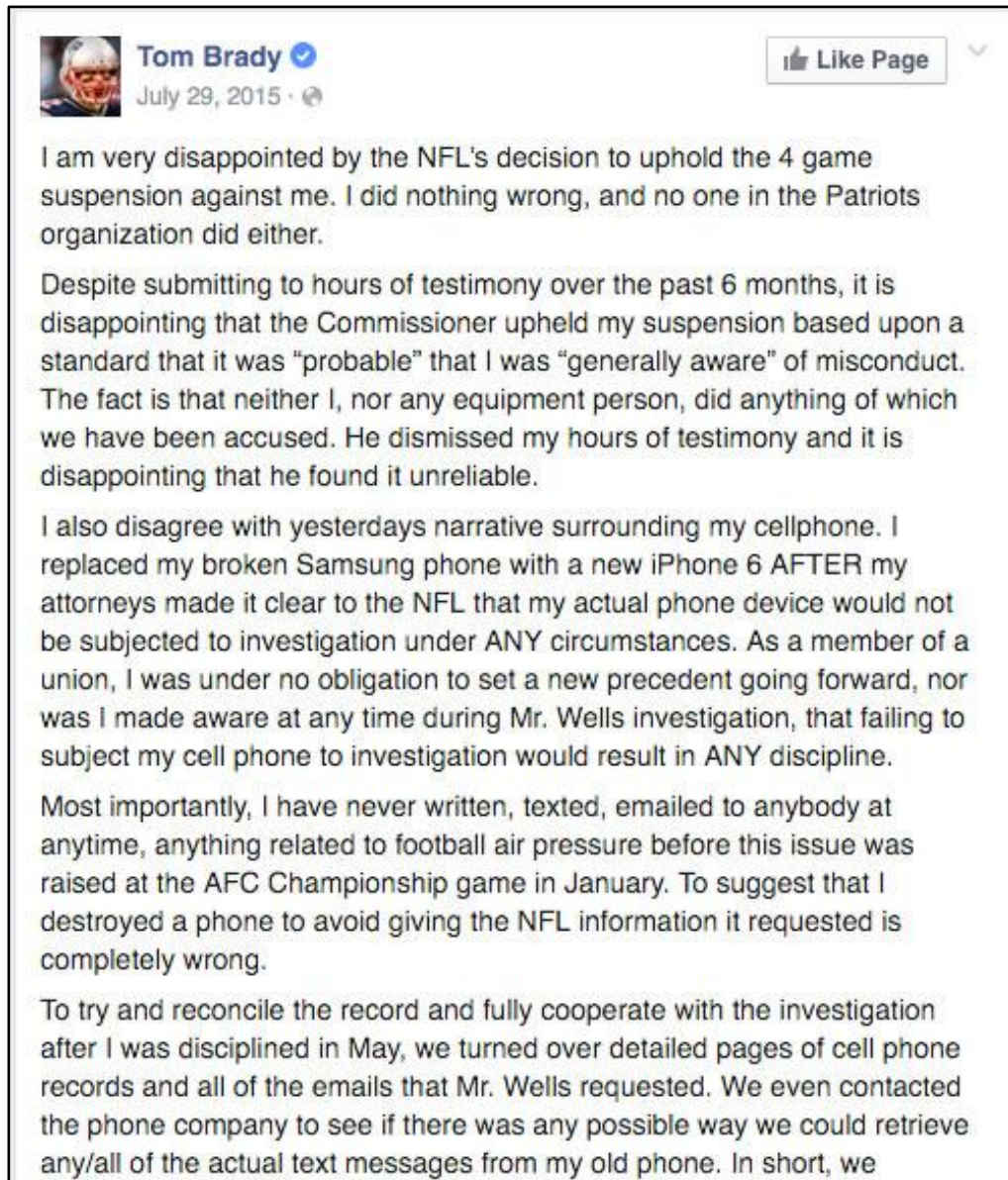


Figure 1. July 29, 2015, Facebook post by Tom Brady about the NFL's decision to uphold the suspension.

Brady attacked the NFL and his four-game suspension and, in the instance above, justified his "non-cooperation" with the destroyed cell phone and refusal to present information to the NFL.

The fourth image restoration component, **corrective action**, was not displayed by Brady for obvious reasons. In this case, Brady consistently denied or deflected the issue and never admitted any wrongdoing. In many image restoration cases, the offender eventually admits to the offense; in this instance, Brady refused to acknowledge any involvement, thus negating a need for corrective action. Ultimately, Brady made a Facebook post as a restorative conclusion and a transition to a modified mortification step (see Figure 2).

Mortification, or apology for the act, was also never officially orchestrated by Brady. Benoit (1997) described mortification as the action where an individual admits fault, apologizes for an action, and asks for forgiveness. However, we believe that mortification was displayed in this case in a unique capacity. For instance, even before the 2016 season began media outlets were calling it "*Brady's Revenge*" and his vengeance tour. During Brady's suspension, the Patriots went 3-1 with backup quarterbacks and when he returned to the field Brady put up an MVP like season. Before Super Bowl LI, Time magazine described the Super Bowl as Brady's opportunity to "*...go for a fifth Super Bowl win, which will be a record for a starting quarterback, while simultaneously avenging this season's 4-game suspension for the entirely overblown Deflategate controversy.*" After winning the Super Bowl in February 2017 (Brady's fifth Super Bowl win in seven Super Bowl appearances) two years after Deflategate began and being named the Super Bowl MVP, Brady vindicated himself and his team and, at least for now, put Deflategate to rest. The question remains, was his image restored?

Analysis and Discussion

Two cartoons from *Forbes* illustrate the shift in public opinion (see Figure 3). While Goodell was never favorable in the eyes of the public, his involvement in Deflategate made him seem vindictive, awkward, and even foolish. While it is true that Brady is still "disliked", his attempts to communicate his victimization were fascinating and, ultimately, allowed himself to be considered more favorable, especially compared to Goodell.



Figure 2. July 15, 2016, Facebook post by Tom Brady expressing gratitude for the support he received in the process and his decision not to proceed with the legal process.

Brady's image does not appear to have been tarnished at all by Deflategate. In fact, as the cartoons illustrate, the Golden Boy reasserted his status as the villain label was shifted, yet again, to Goodell. Before the controversy, Brady was already destined for the Pro Football Hall of Fame as one of the greatest quarterbacks to ever play the game. There will

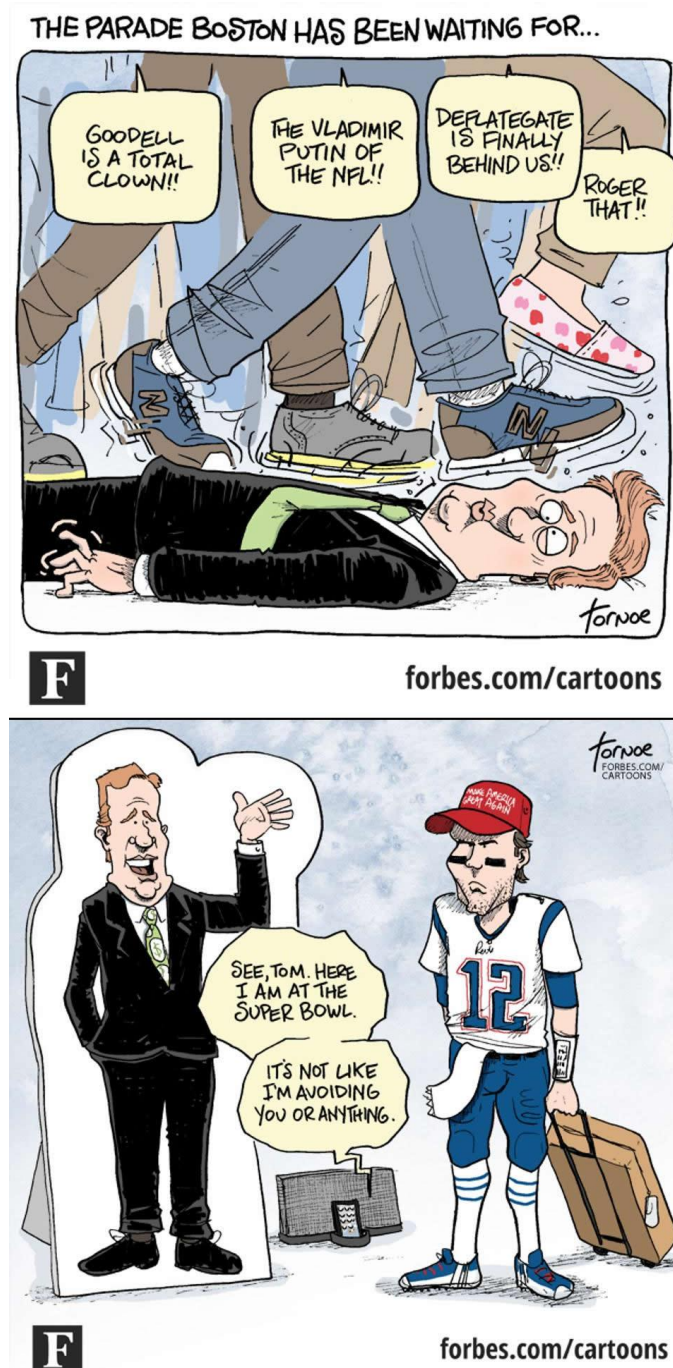


Figure 3. Two cartoons from *Forbes* providing commentary on the Deflategate scandal.

always be a segment that dislikes Brady, as was mentioned above, but his overall status remains relatively unchanged. If anything, overcoming the suspension to lead his team to the playoffs and then overcoming the largest deficit ever in a Super Bowl – 28-3 – to win the Lombardi Trophy 34-28 only added to his legend. Following the game, media stories and social media posts repeatedly called Brady the “GOAT,” or Greatest of All Time.

Adding to the legend was Brady’s post-Super Bowl appearance with his mother, who had fought cancer for 18 months leading up to the Super Bowl and was cleared to travel to Houston for the game only days before (Braziller, 2017). Brady called her “the best mom in the world” and talked about how nice the victory was for her in an interview on Boston’s WEEI radio station the day after the Super Bowl (Braziller, 2017). This family illness further humanized Brady and positioned him as someone for whom life was not perfect. With the images and media reports about Brady greeting his family, including his sick mother who wore a scarf over her head to cover the hair loss, following the victory, how could anyone think negatively of him? Brady had been emotional in speaking about his family in interviews preceding the Super Bowl (Braziller, 2017), thus adding to his “golden boy” or “boy-next-door” persona. While we do not believe this was purposeful, as a means of image restoration, we believe it did have a positive influence on his public persona.

Conclusion

Agenda setting tactics were called out early by Yahoo! Sports columnist Dan Wetzel on May 13, 2015. He wrote that “the story didn’t go big until ESPN reported about 24 hours after the game that the NFL had discovered that 11 of the 12 footballs were measured to be more than 2 pounds per square inch below the league minimum of 12.5. That gave a subject that almost no one knew much about context, significance and potentially sinister intent. ESPN cited a nebulous ‘league source’ at a time when it’s believed no one outside the NFL office knew the actual measurements” (Wetzel, 2015).

The most prestigious sports media entity set the agenda for the story, signaling to fans the story had to be important or the “worldwide leader”

would not tell it. Other media followed suit, closely watching and reporting the minutia of Deflategate. Fans flooded social media with posts, and the League, and the Patriots, made statements via their official websites and social media accounts.

Although the coverage ebbed and flowed – there were periods when there were no new details – the story never died and the public never lost interest because there were periodic updates; when the media reported the scantest detail about the story, it was once again on the minds of readers and viewers.

Even after Brady announced on his Facebook page that he would not take his case to the Supreme Court, the Deflategate stories did not end. First came stories about how the Patriots would perform sans Brady. When the team went 3-1 during his suspension, stories moved to how Brady would manage his comeback. And, as the team continued to win and place itself in playoff contention, stories about Brady possibly making it to the Super Bowl and facing Goodell appeared in traditional and social media across the country.

When the Patriots made the playoffs, reporters watched to see if Goodell would attend games in Foxborough, as he had in seasons past. He did not attend a Patriots home game during the two seasons the Deflategate controversy endured (Bandini, 2017). The commissioner's absence only amped up the interest in how he, Brady and Kraft would handle seeing each other on a big stage.

When New England made it to the Super Bowl in Houston, reporters and fans drooled at the potential conflict between the commissioner, the owner and the golden-boy quarterback. The media set the agenda that this face-off was important, going so far as to tell football fans how to act. Carlos Monarrez (2017) of the Detroit Free Press wrote days before the game:

But today you have to do something that goes against every fiber of your being. You have to root for the New England Patriots to beat the Atlanta Falcons in the Super Bowl because that means Tom Brady gets to beat NFL commissioner Roger Goodell in what might be the most awkward trophy presentation in history.

Even Time magazine got into the fray, with Sean Gregory (2017) writing:

...if there's ever been any year to betray your instinct to pull for an upset, or root hard against Belichick's evil empire, it's probably this one. Picture Roger Goodell, a man who fought Brady in court handing over the Super Bowl MVP trophy to the Pats superstar. Awkward, delicious and a perfect script.

Once the Patriots completed their miraculous comeback to win Super Bowl LI, the media and fans yearned for the Goodell vs. Kraft moment, with Belichick and Brady on the podium at NRG Stadium, after avoiding them for two years. As The New York Times' Ken Belson (2017) put it, "...the three men spoke with their bodies, not their mouths". Kraft did not move a muscle and did not even offer a smile in jubilation of another Super Bowl victory. Goodell spoke to Kraft: "Congratulations to your organization, to your fans and to your community. We are so proud of you." According to Benson's article, "Kraft said nothing in response and thumbed his nose at Goodell in his own remarks to the crowd moments later" (Belson, 2017).

Kraft held the trophy and said: "Two years ago, we won our fourth Super Bowl down in Arizona, and I told our fans it was the sweetest one of all. But a lot as transpired in the last two years, and I don't think that needs any explanation." Although Kraft never said the word "Deflategate," it was clear to what he was referring when he said this Super Bowl win was "unequivocally the sweetest."

Media fascination with the drama was still not over. The following day, Brady received the Super Bowl MVP trophy from Goodell at a Houston ballroom. Two years before – just weeks after Deflategate started – Brady accepted the same award from Goodell, and Brady hugged the commissioner when he received the trophy (Myers, 2017). This time, a handshake replaced the hug but there were no dirty looks or snide remarks (Myers, 2017).

The moment the media and fans had waited for was rather uneventful. The two posed for a photo, and Brady said, "It's an honor to be here and have the commissioner present us with this trophy." But once again, actions spoke volumes. After answering questions from the media, Brady

simply left, leaving Goodell sitting alone to watch Belichick address the media (Belson, 2017).

And just when everyone thought the saga was complete, Goodell announced on March 28, 2017, at the Annual League Meeting in Phoenix that he would attend the Patriots' 2017 NFL Kickoff game at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough. The story that will not go away endures yet another chapter.

Discussion Questions

1. To what extent can lessons learned from Deflategate apply to other organizations or individuals in need of image restoration?
2. Choose an organization or a celebrity with a checkered history and apply the image-restoration strategies to their situation. Design a public relations campaign strategy specifically for the purposes of enhancing their image.
3. What impact does social media (in this case Facebook and Twitter) have on public relations practices and, more specifically, on decisions and strategies made by organizations?
4. Tom Brady's image and restoration was impacted by the Deflategate scandal. Imagine you are a crisis communication expert, would you have advised Tom Brady differently from the beginning of the scandal? Why?
5. What steps could Tom Brady have completed to ensure a more positive public persona (aside from winning a Super Bowl)?

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