The passing of a champ: Newspaper coverage of Muhammad Ali’s death

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This study analyzed coverage of Muhammad Ali’s death in three newspapers: Khaleej Times, The Guardian and The New York Times. Guided by framing analysis, the one-week long coverage period between his death and his burial provided insight into how Ali was portrayed both inside and outside the ring. The study suggested four frames to this media coverage: Ali the celebrity, the entertainer, the humanitarian, and the man of the people. Results indicated that Ali was mostly portrayed as a celebrity and as a man of the people. Ali’s boxing prowess inside his ring and his outspoken nature outside of it ensured that he remained an instantly recognizable figure all over the world. Results also indicated that Ali was an inspiration to many since he stood up for his beliefs and against social injustices.

Key words: Muhammad Ali, Khaleej Times, The Guardian, The New York Times, framing analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Muhammad Ali, who rose to international fame as a heavyweight boxer in the 1960s and 1970s, died on June 4, 2016 at the age of 74. Although he had retired from boxing in 1981 and did not make public appearances on a regular basis, he was still instantly recognizable and admired by many around the world. Guided by framing analysis, the objective of this study is to analyze and interpret messages in a number of newspaper articles that covered Ali’s death, from the day that the world learned of his death to the day of his burial a week later. Three newspapers were chosen for this study: Khaleej Times (UAE), The Guardian (UK) and The New York Times (US). The newspapers chosen for this study were selected on the basis that they have different target audiences and therefore it might be useful to investigate how each covered the death of Muhammad Ali. The choice of these three newspapers from different parts of the world is an attempt to shed light on the death of Ali through three divergent media outlets. It also intends to provide insight into the kind of discourse available on how his life and death were covered.

Muhammad Ali first came to prominence at the age of 18 when he won a gold medal as a light heavyweight boxer at the Rome Olympics in 1960. A few years later he defeated Sonny Liston and became the heavyweight champion of the world at the age of 22. By then he had converted to Islam and discarded his birth name of Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali, 2017). As a celebrated athlete, Ali used his status to partake in anti-segregationist, anti-colonial, and anti-war measures. Inside the ring, Ali took on opponents with a confidence and a fighting spirit rarely seen in any other athlete.
Outside the ring, Ali’s enthusiastic and jovial character made him the center of attention wherever he went. Ali was also a conscientious objector who refused to be drafted. At the time, many Americans saw him as a controversial figure. He was stripped of his title and did not fight for over three years. Ali only returned to boxing in 1970, and did not regain his heavyweight crown until 1974 when he defeated George Foreman in the famous Rumble in the Jungle bout fought in Kinshasa, Zaire. He eventually retired in 1981 just shy of his 40th birthday (Muhammad Ali, 2017).

It should be remembered that Ali grew up in segregated America and his refusal to sit down and be treated as a second class citizen was to be a defining feature of his character. His fight against racism made him admired by many around the world. The fact that he converted to Islam and changed his name initially made him unpopular but demonstrated his will power and single-mindedness (Khaleej Times, 2016c). Ali was a symbol of civil disobedience who was an iconic boxer as well as a figure that rose above the world of sports to act as an inspiration to many.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The almost-constant coverage of celebrity news has become a common occurrence in many mass media outlets. Nayar (2009) opined that media creates celebrity culture by focusing on youth and glamor. This media representation is bound to occur since we live in societies where we hardly have face-to-face interaction with celebrities. Such interactions, however, are facilitated by heavy media consumption (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998).

It is therefore not surprising that many looked up to Ali to be their inspiration, since he was a proponent of social change (Gorsevski and Butterworth, 2011). Part of this ability to inspire others might be attributed to his iconic character that transcended cultural barriers (Ghosh, 2011). This ability to influence so many may also be because Ali was probably the most recognizable face and name in the world (Mosley, 2016). It is worthwhile to note that Ali rose to boxing prominence in the 1960s, during a time when African-Americans were treated as second class citizens and were subjected to racism and lived under segregationist policies. Ali’s charismatic personality and his principled stance to reject the draft and the Vietnam War put him on a collision course with the establishment but eventually elevated him to hero status especially among African-Americans.

The heightened media coverage of celebrities increases when these celebrities support development initiatives (Samman et al., 2009); but celebrities can also become involved in a wide range of issues such as social welfare and politics among others and are thus able to exert their influence on public opinion (Thrall et al., 2008; Harris, 1995). Heightened media coverage of celebrities also increases since people tend to develop emotional bonds with celebrities that they hold in high esteem and are therefore affected by events or even health issues in that celebrity’s life (Brown and Basil, 2010). As such it has become common to see corporations using a celebrity to endorse their product or to support their cause.

When it comes to celebrities and health issues, Myrick et al. (2014) asserted that increased public awareness of a certain disease becomes visible whenever a well-known personality is ill with that disease. For instance when former basketball star Magic Johnson announced that he was infected with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in 1991, people became more knowledgeable about the disease. Likewise, the death of Apple CEO Steve Jobs from pancreatic cancer in 2011 created significant media attention and public debate about the topic. In the context of this study, the fact that a celebrity like Muhammad Ali had Parkinson’s disease (which hindered his movement and his speech) would have led to increased media scrutiny and public awareness of the disease.

Increased coverage by the media of celebrities and their actions may be attributed to what Schultz (2007) identified as the five news criteria that enable journalists to determine the viability of a news item. These are: timeliness (current affairs or new information), relevance (importance of the news item to the audience), identification (how geographically close the news item is to the consumer), conflict (highlighting the unusual) and sensation (containing uncommon or spectacular elements). While journalists are trained to identify stories that contain such criteria, it is however significant to note that when it comes to news effects, there is an inherent link between the relevance of a news story and the media consumer (Gans, 2003). This selective nature of the media consumer determines the specific news item that has an effect on him/her.

One reason Ali received constant media attention was because he was a revolutionary. He famously introduced the Ali shuffle – moving his feet so quickly to confuse his opponent – mainly as a showboating strategy but also as an indication of his quickness in the ring. Ali also introduced the rope-a-dope style, in which he would lean against the ropes to save energy and exhaust his opponent. This set him apart from other boxers and famously won him his encounter against George Foreman in 1974 (Oates, 2016). Outside the ring, Ali was a trailblazer who allowed others to stand up for themselves and be proud of who they were since he was a champion but one who ultimately considered himself to be just another human being (Schaap, 2016).

Research question

1. How was Muhammad Ali’s death framed in Khaleej Times, The Guardian and The New York Times?
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study used framing analysis to scrutinize the coverage of Muhammad Ali’s death in Khaleej Times, The Guardian and The New York Times. Framing analysis primarily involves how media package messages for public consumption. Media has to pay attention to the way news is presented; this very presentation is referred to as framing. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) commented that frames help us to make meaning of media messages through ways in which they ‘create contexts’ thus placing heavy emphasis on the placement and on the delivery of such content.

Framing also allows the construction of meaning when consumers are exposed to certain media content. Framing theory notes that there may be different perspectives to look at an issue (Fornaciari, 2011). Analyzing framing discourse thus allows media consumers to understand how messages are packaged and delivered by news organizations. It also allows media consumers to assign importance to certain frames based on how the media displays them.

McQuail (2010) opined that framing analysis also examines meanings and assumptions. Oftentimes media pay particular attention to an issue thereby highlighting ‘a certain problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation’ (Entman, 1993). Framing thus allows media viewers a more refined analysis of media messages since it presents a useful way of examining such media coverage.

De Vreese (2005) explained that as individuals, media framing of certain events may cause us to change our attitudes based on how media displays certain frames. It is imperative to note that framing allows media consumers to construct meaning when exposed to certain media items. Framing theory also examines how news content influences viewer perception of a certain item based on how such an item is displayed in the news. It was Goffman (1974) who first stressed that a frame is necessary to shape experience or information and to interpret it meaningfully.

The framing process itself involves the interaction of three actors; interested sources and media organizations, journalists (that is, the media) and audiences (in this case the readers) (Scheufele, 1999). Each of these actors has the ability to influence frames in their own way. The focus predominantly lies with how the media frames an issue but the audience may choose to interpret information in their own way.

It is imperative to note that the media uses attention-grabbing techniques to attract the audience to certain items in the news (DeFleur, 2010). This may occur through some technique or through placement of a news item in a visible section of a newspaper or at the top of the broadcast in television news. However such attention-grabbing techniques may misrepresent reality in news programs, thus painting a less than accurate picture of reality. The allotment of space or time to a certain news item by a media entity is an indication of how significant the item is (McQuail, 2010). This misrepresentation is often times unintentional, but might nevertheless lead to distorted public opinion (Lippmann, 1946).

Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) remarked that framing contains a macro and a micro element. At the macro level, framing is how media present information to the audience. The micro level entails how media consumers use information presented by the media. Framing also presents relatively complex issues in simple terms, so as to be understood by audiences. Thus, framing can also be used to analyze content.

The objective of this study is to find meaning in the ways in which Khaleej Times, The Guardian and The New York Times present news about Muhammad Ali’s death to their readers. Such meaning might be the result of patterns or bias in the presentation of news stories. This research is therefore both about how the three newspapers cover Ali’s death and how they present such content.

METHODOLOGY

Daily observations were carried out on the websites of Khaleej Times, The Guardian and The New York Times starting on June 4 and ending on June 10, 2016. These observations were conducted twice a day – in the morning and in the evening – to make sure that all data collected was up-to-date. News articles, editorials and feature stories were analyzed. No pictures or videos were taken into consideration for this research since the objective was to analyze written text only.

The online versions of these newspapers carried the same articles as the print copies. As Atkinson and Coffey (1974) pointed out written texts of different kinds mediate interactions of social life in modern society. The observation period of one week was deemed enough since it began on the day Ali died and ended on the day that he was buried. The objective of this research was therefore to study how Khaleej Times, The Guardian and The New York Times reported his death using qualitative methodology of textual analysis.

Flick (1998) posited that qualitative research is ‘inherently multidimensional in focus’ to thoroughly understand the phenomenon in question and to make meaning of how Ali’s death was covered in selected newspapers. By covering his death, this study was ultimately attempting to understand how coverage of his life was reported, since media tends to cover death by shedding light on life as well. However, Flick (1998) added that ‘objective reality can never be captured. We know a thing only through its representations.’ Therefore, the overriding objective of this project is to study a topic that is making news headlines. Additionally, many parts of Muhammad Ali’s life have been covered and scrutinized in the media since he is a sporting and humanitarian icon whose face is instantly recognizable.

The newspaper articles were analyzed under four frames. These were; Ali the celebrity, Ali the entertainer, Ali the humanitarian and Ali the man of the people. These frames were not predefined by the researcher but rather emerged as a result of examining the articles. The frames are not exhaustive but enable broad generalizations to be made regarding coverage of Ali’s death in the three newspapers over the coverage period. The researcher used the article title as the coding unit and placed it under at least one of the four frames.

As Silverman (2003) pointed out, texts on their own do not
represent organizational routines clearly but are only social productions. Hence it is imperative to use textual analysis in order to make meaning of data gathered, since textual analysis is used in communication research to examine and interpret a visual message (Frey et al., 2000).

The newspaper articles used for this study are a form of communication text and can therefore provide an insight into the structure of the messages contained in the texts. Using textual analysis is an appropriate methodology since it often studies archival records, such as newspapers and film. The choice of Khaleej Times, The Guardian and The New York Times by the author was intended to provide some variety to the coverage that Muhammad Ali’s death received. This cross-national comparison enables the investigation of Ali’s death through three different national frameworks. This will help place in context ways in which Ali’s death was framed. The three newspapers are widely read in their respective countries and are large metropolitan dailies. CNN (2015) reported that the New York Times has 640,000 print customers, while The Guardian has a circulation of 250,000 according to the National Readership Survey (2016). Khaleej Times (2016e) claims to have readership of 450,000.

In order to better understand how the newspaper articles are analyzed, it is beneficial to operationalize each of the four frames. In the context of this study, Ali the celebrity refers to his status as a super athlete, one who is known and recognized. Ali the entertainer has to do with his style as one who is rarely lost for words. Ali was eloquent, articulate and witty. When it comes to Ali the humanitarian, consideration has to be given to his softer side, one through which he was charitable and benevolent, touching many lives over the years. Finally, Ali the man of the people analyzed his down-to-earth personality, starting with his simple roots and assessing how he remained grounded even at the height of his fame.

Findings: Celebrating the life (and death) of Muhammad Ali

The coverage period of one week from June 4 to June 10 yielded a total of 85 articles in the three newspapers covered (24 articles appeared on Khaleej Times, 40 articles appeared on The Guardian and 21 articles appeared on the The New York Times). The total number of articles collected during the allocated period of time yielded enough information to draw broad conclusions regarding Ali’s representation in the three newspapers since Ali’s death led to considerable media coverage.

The choice of textual analysis was deemed as an appropriate method to collect data for this study. As Hirsch (1967) commented, textual analysis provides a useful way through which to interpret the messages communicated. As such, this study is about analyzing 85 articles published in three newspapers which covered the same topic.

The wealth of information is perhaps not surprising since Ali was regarded a sports icon around the world. The fact that he was so outspoken against the injustices that were faced by many made his influence to transcend the field of boxing thereby influencing people from all walks of life. An example of Muhammad Ali’s influence can be found in Musa’s (2016) article that was published by The Guardian on June 4. Musa is an Australian rapper, poet and novelist of mixed descent. His article entitled ‘Muhammad Ali taught me to be proud of my skin and Muslim faith: Just by being himself, the black boxer changed the life of a confused, spectacled half-Asian, half-white kid on the other side of the world’ described the influence that the boxer had on the young Musa in the 1980s and 1990s. Musa pointed out that Ali taught him to believe in himself and to trust in his abilities in order to achieve success.

Coverage by all three newspapers started on June 4, the day of Ali’s death. Especially in the case of The Guardian, coverage was divided by day, so the reader could easily identify each day’s coverage, probably for convenience purposes. The Guardian even had a section labeled ‘Muhammad Ali’ and all articles about Ali could easily be located in this section. The Guardian’s website was therefore better organized than that of the two other newspapers. It is useful to point out that Ali’s death made the front page on all three newspapers on June 4.

In the case of The New York Times, all articles concerning Ali were located in either the sports section or in the opinion section. Articles pertaining to Ali were not located under any specific section in the Khaleej Times. However, a simple search using the term ‘Muhammad Ali’ led to all articles written about Ali on all three newspapers, which made the articles easy to locate.

Not surprisingly, June 4, the day that Ali died, witnessed the most number of articles with 12 by Khaleej Times, 15 by The Guardian and 8 by The New York Times representing approximately 41% of the total number of 85 articles written in the three newspapers over the one week time period studied. June 5, one day after Ali died witnessed the second highest number of articles recorded. On that day, Khaleej Times had 3 articles, The Guardian had 14 articles and The New York Times had 3 articles representing about 24% of the total number of articles published. This means that two-thirds of the 85 articles appeared on the day of Ali’s death and on the following day. On June 10, the day Ali was buried, Khaleej Times published 2 articles, The Guardian published 4 articles and The New York Times published 3 articles. This represented about 11% of the total number of articles published.

By June 7, Ali’s death was no longer a leading story. This was a classic example of how media organizations operate – intensive coverage when a major news story breaks and then it tends to diminish over the following days. An example is Egypt Air flight MS 804 from Paris to Cairo that disappeared over the Mediterranean Sea on May 19, 2016. The initial coverage was overwhelming but about one month later coverage had significantly cooled down even though the cause of the crash was unknown. An exception to how media organizations cover the news is the fight against Islamic State or the war in Syria, both of which have led to considerable loss of lives.

All 85 articles were analyzed along certain frames. These were; Ali the celebrity, Ali the entertainer, Ali the
Table 1. Indicating the number of times each frame was recorded.

| Frame                  | Number of occurrence |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| Ali the celebrity      | 69                   |
| Ali the entertainer    | 25                   |
| Ali the humanitarian   | 10                   |
| Ali the man of the people | 62                  |

humanitarian and Ali the man of the people. These frames were not predefined but emerged as the researcher analyzed the 85 articles (Table 1).

### Ali the celebrity

This frame occurred 69 times, which was the highest number among all other frames. Muhammad Ali was celebrated even in death as evident by the number of people who paid tribute to him or who attended his funeral. When he was an active boxer in the 1960s and 1970s, Ali was perhaps the most recognizable athlete. His celebrity status was enhanced by his ability to excel in his sport. During a time when athletes were not as renowned as they are today, Ali broke grounds to become an instantly recognizable figure for over 50 years (Lipsyte, 2016).

Ali’s celebrity status could be seen by coverage he received when his body arrived in his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky for burial. An article in Khaleej Times entitled ‘Muhammad Ali’s body arrives in his hometown Louisville’ described the tremendous reception that his body received including flags at government buildings being flown at half-mast (Khaleej Times, 2016b).

Muhammad Ali’s official website, muhammadali.com (2016) indicated that he received a host of accolades such as United Nations (UN) Messenger of Peace, Amnesty International Lifetime Achievement Award, Presidential Medal of Freedom, Sports Illustrated Sportsman of the Century and the BBC Sports Personality of the Century all an indication of his celebrity status. Additionally, Ali’s celebrity status became more visible when he opposed the Vietnam War and refused to be drafted into the army. Ali’s stance brought publicity to the war when he became an outspoken critic, none more so than when he said:

“I ain’t got no trouble with them Vietcong” (Morris 2016).

An article published by The Guardian on June 9 provided further indication of Ali’s celebrity standing. The article was entitled “From rejected to revered: thousands pay respects to Muhammad Ali. Two-day remembrance begins with Islamic prayer service as family and famous friends are joined by more than 14,000 admirers’ and detailed Ali’s five-hour long funeral procession as it made its way through Louisville (Teague, 2016a). Thousands of people lined the streets to bid farewell to Ali and a further 14,000 attended the ceremony in which a number of recognizable figures such as former US President Bill Clinton and actor Billy Crystal among others spoke.

### Ali the entertainer

This frame was recorded 25 times. As an entertainer, Ali had a way with words, often taunting his opponents and praising himself. When he became the heavy weight champion of the world for the first time in 1964, Ali famously said that he ‘shook up the world’ since he was the overwhelming underdog that fought against Sonny Liston (Mitchell, 2016a).

Muhammad Ali’s famous ‘I am the greatest’ quote was something that he repeated again and again. When news of his death was announced, US President Barack Obama led the tributes by stating that Ali was “The Greatest. Period” (Smith, 2016). In more recent times, his ‘impossible is nothing’ quote became a slogan that was used by sportswear manufacturer Adidas for decades.

Ali’s entertainment qualities set him apart from others and drew attention to boxing as a sport. He used to describe himself as ‘pretty’ a quality that was unique to himself and certainly not his opponents. In press conferences before a fight, Ali used to predict in which round he will knock down an opponent and end a fight. In his 1963 fight against Henry Cooper, he boldly predicted that ‘this is no jive, Cooper will go in five’. Additionally one of Ali’s most famous sayings was ‘float like a butterfly, sting like a bee, Joe can’t hit what his eyes can’t see’ which he directed at Joe Frazier, whom he fought twice in 1971 and 1974 (The Guardian, 2016).

When Ali was preparing to take on George Foreman in 1974, he delivered another of his famous lines by stating: ‘if you think the world was surprised when Nixon resigned, wait till I whup Foreman’s behind’ (Powell, 2016).

What Muhammad Ali said outside the ring provided as much entertainment as his boxing prowess inside the ring.

### Ali the humanitarian

The Ali the humanitarian frame was mentioned ten times
in the 85 articles analyzed. This represented the least amount of times that a frame was mentioned. In 1984, Ali announced that he had Parkinson's just a few years after retiring from boxing. As a humanitarian, Ali helped to raise awareness of Parkinson's disease. He did not shy from public view despite his illness and his lighting of the torch at the Olympic Games in Atlanta in 1996 is an example. A global audience was able to see the extent of the damage that the disease had on Ali who was clearly shaking, as he tried to control his body (Cowell, 2016).

In his article entitled 'Against Parkinson's, Muhammad Ali Proved Himself Again,' Cowell (2016) commented that at the 2012 London Olympics, Ali was one of the Olympic flag bearers. The image of Ali dressed in white with dark sunglasses and surrounded by other dignitaries, seemingly oblivious to what was happening around him, was as potent as any of his powerful punches.

One example of Ali's humanitarian attribute was his 1974 visit to a school in south London where he interacted with 1,000 pupils and their teachers. The invitation had been extended to Ali just a few days earlier and his visit was a gesture that showed his human side (Townsend, 2016). Ali's humanitarian characteristic was again visible in 1978 when he befriended a Bangladeshi also called Ali based on their shared name. Muhammad Ali visited Ali from Bangladesh in his home several times and took pictures with him and his family (Khaleej Times, 2016d).

Menon (2016) in an article entitled 'Boxing: Meeting Muhammad Ali in the summer of 1967' pointed out that the summer of that year was an unforgettable one for Noorjehan Zaidi, a Kenyan who was studying in the United States at the time. Zaidi met Ali and his wife in 1967 and took a picture to document that encounter. Ever since, she has been proud to show that picture. This represented another instance in which Ali's humanitarian side and his willingness to interact with fans was visible.

By and large, the humanitarian side of Muhammad Ali was visible through his actions and the way he touched many peoples' lives. After his retirement from boxing, Ali gave speeches in which he preached peace and acceptance and even made a mission to Iraq to plead for the release of American hostages in 1991. It was Hauser (2016) who noted that 'Ali was a towering social and political figure' who gave inspiration to many people around the world.

**Ali the man of the people**

This frame was recorded on 62 occasions, second only to Ali the Celebrity frame. As a man of the people, Ali inspired others to believe in themselves and to achieve their goals. Borkakoty (2016) published an article in Khaleej Times entitled 'His death hurts more than any of the blows I endured. Mary Kom, a professional boxer stated that she took up boxing because she was inspired by Ali. According to Kom, Ali taught her never to give up in the face of adversity. She admitted that she tried to copy Ali's style in the ring, but found it difficult to do, since Ali had a certain air of uniqueness surrounding him.

Belson and Dwyer's (2016) piece entitled 'Muhammad Ali Fans Pay Homage to Their Local Hero' was published by The New York Times on June 10 described the celebratory nature of the funeral procession as it passed through the city. The reader is reminded of Ali's star power and his ability to relate to the average person even after his life had ended. We are also reminded of the fact that Ali was an inspiration. 'So many young men of his era all over the world took up boxing because they wanted to move like him, box like him, talk like him, be like him', Mitchell (2016a) wrote in a tribute to Ali.

After the initial news pieces that reported his death, came the tributes from celebrities worldwide. One of such tribute came from British boxer Amir Khan in an article that appeared on the June 4 issue of Khaleej Times entitled 'Legend inspired my charity work: Khan' (Khaleej Times, 2016a). Khan stated that he set up a boxing academy and is involved in charity work in Pakistan mainly due to inspiration that he received from Ali.

Perhaps the people of Louisville, Kentucky provided the utmost demonstration of how Ali was truly one of their own. On hearing news of his death, thousands headed out to Muhammad Ali Center to pay their respects by lighting candles and laying flowers (Teague, 2016b).

**DISCUSSION**

Ali retired from boxing in 1981 and his health began to deteriorate shortly afterwards. In the 35 years between his retirement and his death, his public appearances declined sharply, mainly due to health issues. In the last ten years or so of his life, Ali made fewer and fewer public appearances and most news items about him tended to report on his poor health (Muhammad Ali, 2017). However, his death on June 4 was accompanied by intense media coverage.

Ghosh (2011) opined that even in death, celebrities receive considerable media attention. The death of Muhammad Ali was therefore well-reported in the three newspaper examined for this study. His funeral – attended by some 14,000 people including politicians, religious figures, actors and musicians among others – was covered using live text commentary on The Guardian and was beamed to a global audience on a number of news outlets such as CNN, BBC and Sky News.

Of the three newspapers examined in this study, the fewest number of articles (21 articles) appeared on The New York Times. Perhaps this was surprising since Ali was an American and the expectation was that an American newspaper by default will have the most coverage of him. As it turned out, The New York Times had less coverage of Ali's death than Khaleej Times (24
It was The Guardian that had the most coverage of Muhammad Ali-related stories than the other two newspapers in this study. Perhaps this could be attributed to the fact that the British thought of Ali as their adopted son as evident in an article entitled ‘Beckham, the Beatles and Bruno: how we all fell in love with the great champ: Sports stars and others remember Muhammad Ali and his affection for Britain from his very first visit’ published on June 5, 2016 which pointed out how a number of well-known British athletes such as David Beckham, Frank Bruno and Gary Lineker were quick to pay tribute to Ali when his death was announced (Townsend, 2016).

Another article published on the same day was entitled ‘A special relationship: how the British took Ali to their hearts: Booed on his first visit in 1963, he won over the fight crowds and then the wider public through his humour and a shared sense he was the people’s champion’ in which the author went as far as to say that most Britons wanted Ali to win even when fighting against British boxers (Anthony, 2016). Even The New York Times acknowledged Ali’s special relation with Britain. In an article entitled ‘Against Parkinson’s, Muhammad Ali Proved Himself Again’, Cowell (2016) pointed out that the British public were keen on following Ali’s fights and were equally captivated by Ali’s prime-time television appearances.

Muhammad Ali lost his speech ability and was unable to speak for the last 20 years of life. Writing for The New York Times, Cowell (2016) was able to articulate what Ali was going through in his daily struggle against Parkinson’s.

One moment they have control of their movements, their limbs, their life. The next, those abilities begin to slip. The voice might slur. The fingers quiver. A firm gait gives way to a limp, a stumble. The outcome is not declared by some referee standing over the fallen loser to the roar of the victor’s fans. It is offered by a physician, quietly. There is no simple knockout; only attrition (Cowell, 2016).

It was saddening to say the least to see a man who was once so powerful and so assured become someone who required assistance to perform the simplest of tasks. Thomas Hauser, Muhammad Ali’s biographer noted that despite the debilitating illness, Ali had no ‘intellectual deficits’ and pointed out that ‘his wit was sharp and his thought processes were clear’ (Hauser, 2016).

Younge (2016) was able to articulate what Ali stood for by stressing that ‘throughout, the most powerful message Ali sent was one of self-definition – a freedom beyond the legal rights and formal equality that had been won as he rose to prominence’. Younge (2016) also stated that Ali is ‘universally celebrated in death in no small part because he was always larger than life’. Ali was able to inspire others by believing in his abilities and by being a deeply religious and devout Muslim.

The four frames used to classify coverage of Ali’s death in the three newspapers emerged as a result of the analysis of the articles.

These frames provided an overview of how Ali conducted himself and how he was regarded by many around the world. Although the one-week long coverage of articles in Khaleej Times, The Guardian and The New York Times is by no means exhaustive, it gave an idea of the kind of attention that Ali’s death attracted. The three newspapers are from different countries on different continents thereby providing an indication of the popularity and of the media coverage that Muhammad Ali received. The coverage by three different newspapers also provided differing perspective regarding how these newspapers presented information to their readers.

CONCLUSION

Muhammad Ali’s career as a boxer spanned two decades. During that time, he thrilled audiences with his performance inside the ring. Ali was also able to delight audiences outside the ring with his words. By the early 2000s however, Parkinson’s disease had caused so much damage to Ali’s health that Mitchell (2016b) described him as a ‘sad shadow of the great athlete who had thrilled the world’. By then his ability to talk had been greatly reduced and he could hardly control his body movements.

This study covered how Muhammad Ali’s death was covered in three newspapers. In order to do so, parts of Ali’s life were also examined to provide insight about who he was as a champion and as a man. But Muhammad Ali’s life was not always filled with glamor, because he had many excess, most notably his three failed marriages. In his later years, some of his children from previous marriages spoke bitterly about being excluded from their father’s wealth by his fourth wife (Morris, 2016).

But despite this, an editorial in The Guardian (2016) pointed out that Ali was the bravest of men who fought a number of battles during his lifetime but who in his later years had become a fragile and tragic witness to ‘his indomitable humanity as a stricken warrior’. It is interesting to note that Ali considered himself to be just another human being.

To many however, he was not just another human being. How could he be when he was larger than life and ‘rose, head and shoulders, above us, but those shoulders were broad enough to allow us to climb up there with him and see that we’re in this together’ (Mosley, 2016). In his life, Ali was an inspiration to many people around the world and that ability to inspire others might continue for a long time.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.
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