Manufacturing the Mythology of "Be-Leaf": A Thematic Analysis of 2017 Playoff Coverage in the Toronto Star

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by

Erin Forbes

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Manufacturing the Mythology of “Be-Leaf”:
A Thematic Analysis of 2017 Playoff Coverage in the *Toronto Star*

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December 19, 2017
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Abstract

For the better part of a century, Canadians have gathered around television sets and radios on Saturday nights for Hockey Night in Canada. Each viewer connected to every other viewer during the game in a dense imagined community. In the new media era, Canadians at home and abroad gather around computers and tablets to partake in the same rituals of an even greater imagined community. Spurred by globalization however, the game of hockey, a vastly important component in Canada’s cultural identity, becomes increasingly commodified and exclusionary. Nowhere is this exclusion more problematic than in Toronto, where the Maple Leafs are now valued at almost 1.5 billion dollars. The team’s “local” paper, which is consumed nationally, promotes the team and beckons new fans to enter “Leafs Nation” each season.

This research examines 13 days of Toronto Star coverage of the Toronto Maple Leafs 2017 playoff run. Through a hybrid method combining critical discourse and content analysis, the research seeks to identify themes and Maple Leaf myths that the Star promotes and perpetuates, and how those myths support a massive brand public. The analysis identifies four threads of myth within the sample: Winning Tradition, Be-Leaf, Inherent Violence, and Depoliticized Power. The brand public, unlike the imagined community, is shallow and transient, but its existence justifies the enormously high cost of participation, despite the franchise going 50 years without a Stanley Cup win. The Star has the highest circulation in the country and is the most liberal leaning mainstream newspaper in Canada, which raises questions about the Star’s social responsibilities: are they responsible for keeping the public accurately and fairly informed, or are they responsible for helping build up the brand of a billion dollar corporation?
Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the people I love.

To my Mom and Dad who have been unfailing in their support through five and a half years of post-secondary education. Thank you for bringing me into this world.

To Andrew, who never fails to check in on me and is probably the most excited to read this out of everyone. Thank you for always telling me I’m smarter than you. I’m not sure that’s true but it did keep me moving forward.

To Ed “Fast Eddy” Rogacki, the greatest hockey player never drafted by the NHL.

To Alex, who has been with me on the front line of my MA from day one. I cannot properly articulate how much that has meant to me and I do not know if I will ever be able to thank you enough, but I hope this dedication is a good start.

And for Richard, who I miss everyday.
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CHAPTER ONE

“The Toronto media always has been inclined to overrate the Leafs.” (Houston, 1989, p. 3)

Introduction

2017 marks the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the National Hockey League (NHL) and the 90th anniversary of the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey club. More significantly, it marks the first year the Maple Leafs have made the NHL playoffs after a full 82 game season since 2004. Amidst the fervor in Toronto and much of Southwestern Ontario, one final depressing statistic remains: half a century has now passed since the Maple Leafs last won the Stanley Cup in 1967.

Despite 50 years of set backs, the team remains one of the most highly profitable sports franchises in the world, currently valued at just under one and a half billion dollars (Ozanian, 2017). How is this possible? A possible contributing factor is the over inflation the team in the “local paper” which is consumed both regionally and nationally. This becomes problematic as smaller media companies and news publishers continue to be swallowed yearly by large media companies such as Rogers and Bell Media.

With a substantial in flow of corporate money, the Maple Leafs’ losing tradition somehow equates to financial success, arguably defying the logic of running a business. Hockey fans are increasingly shut out and they watch from afar as a beloved cultural past time and bold symbol of Canadian national identity, is mismanaged and reduced to dollars and cents.

Research Objective

Through an analysis of the Toronto Star during the 2017 playoff run, the objective of this research is to identify and examine how the paper contributes to Maple Leafs myths.
These franchise myths are problematic as they capitalize on larger pre-existing Canadian cultural myths about hockey. When used and published by the Star, rather than bringing readers together through an imagined community, the myths ultimately serve to benefit the Maple Leaf’s brand public.

The resulting growth of the brand public creates brand value for the team that, in the corporation’s eyes, justifies the extremely high and exclusionary pricing of being part of the Maple Leafs fanbase. With roughly 82% of the seats in the Air Canada Centre belonging to season ticket holders, it is difficult for fans to attend games in person. Even when seats are re-sold: “the biggest markups occur on the least expensive seats. Where upper-bowl seats average $80 per game as part of season ticket packages, they average $108 as single-game seats and $141 on the secondary market” (Campbell, 2017a). Furthering lines of economic division, the cost of equipment and participation is unattainable for most average Canadian families (Zuurbier, 2016). “Blue collar families can’t afford to keep a kid in hockey” (Riley, 2016). Statistics indicate that in Canada, youth participation in hockey is decreasing, while participation in “world sports" such as soccer and basketball are rising. “The equipment costs [for world sports] are minimal and there are no exorbitant rink rental fees to contend with. Anyone can play.” (Riley, 2016).

Financing, however, is not the only barrier keeping Canadians out. Along racial lines, hockey remains a predominantly white sport with predominantly white fans. This social issue within the sport can be traced back to the 1930s when government of Canada interference caused the shut down of the Coloured Hockey League (Harding, 2017).

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1 The term ‘world sports’ refers to sports that are played and popular globally. Soccer has 4 billion followers and basketball close to 2 billion, across Africa, Asia, and South America (Riley, 2016).
Inequalities persist in hockey along the lines of gender as well. The Canadian Women’s Hockey League (CWHL), for example, was established in 2007 but only began paying its players a salary at the beginning of the 2017 season (Brady, 2017). With a maximum wage of $10,000, these CWHL salaries are scarcely a drop in the bucket when compared to men’s salaries in the National Hockey League. Yet the big league continues to stand by and flaunt its “Hockey is For Everyone” campaign.

These problems are nothing new. Globalization however, exacerbates the problems, without attempting to offer a resolution. Further, brands such as Tim Horton’s for example, use hockey as an advertising trope, endlessly recycling and repeating the narrow slice of Canadian cultural mythology built around the game. A growing number of Canadians however, would argue that these are not accurate representations of the game “bringing people together.” Rather, the veritable exclusionary culture that creates these obstacles to participation, make the cultural myth that gets promoted, fundamentally undemocratic.

The Toronto Star’s role in this myth-machine is doubly questionable due to the Star’s left-leaning principles. According to the “Statement of Principles” set forth by the publication (and accessible on their website), the Star is a “paper for the people” with a “responsibility to be accurate, fair, honest, and transparent” (2017). The paper places a “particular emphasis on politics and public affairs” as well as devoting “public attention on injustices of all kinds and on reforms designed to correct them” (2017). The Toronto Star is arguably Canada’s most liberal mainstream publication, having endorsed the NDP in 2011 (“Toronto Star endorses the NDP,” 2011) and the Liberal Party in 2015 (“Toronto Star endorses Liberal Leader,” 2015).
Does the *Star*, despite being a socially mindful publication, promote the tales of a billion dollar franchise and a sport that is exclusionary along class, gender, and racial lines? Their statement does later disclose the Star’s responsibility to its advertisers and shareholders, however the paper has no direct financial affiliation with the Maple Leafs. Media giants Rogers and Bell jointly own a 75 percent share in the Maple Leafs, with Bell additionally owning a share of The Globe and Mail and Rogers operating Sportsnet, a premium channel exclusively broadcasting regular season Leafs games. The *Toronto Star* is operated by TorStar Group, which has no commercial ownership connections to either of these media titans.

Using content analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper will carry out a qualitative thematic analysis of all Maple Leaf stories published in the *Toronto Star* on April 9th, 2017 and between April 13th, 2017 and April 24th, 2017. In addition, a quantitative comparison of Toronto Raptors stories published during this time will be made, as the Raptors were also playing in the first round of the NBA playoffs at this time. If hockey is a Canadian cultural thread that weaves us all together, a narrative to be embraced by old and new Canadians alike, how can it come attached to a multi-million dollar price tag? The game as it was traditionally played, and is now romantically remembered, fostered an imagined community that shaped Canada in the post-war era. That same imagined community, which still exists, is being exploited to become more institutionalized and corporatized with each passing season. This research will examine the *Toronto Star*’s role in the sport media complex and seeks to identify threads of published mythology that sustain a shallow Maple Leafs brand public, rather than a genuine hockey community.
Maple Leaf’s History

Hello Out There, We’re on the Air

The history of the Toronto Maple Leafs dates back a decade prior to its official founding, to the establishment of the National Hockey League in 1917. At the outset, the NHL began with four Canadian teams: the Montreal Wanderers, the Montreal Canadiens, the Ottawa Senators and the Toronto Arenas (Houston, 1989; Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). The Arenas won the Stanley Cup in the NHL’s inaugural season before being sold in 1919 and renamed the Toronto St. Patrick’s.

In its formative years, the NHL enjoyed moderate success and by the early 1920s the mass consumption of hockey was gaining momentum, largely thanks to the evolution of sports journalism. Reporters began writing from the rink side, elaborating beyond goal scoring to more colourful and detailed descriptions of play. Audiences revelled in these details as “growing numbers of new fans not only wanted to know the score, but also wanted to hear and read about the flow of the game, the emotions of the crowd, and the character demonstrated by the players” (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993, p. 85). It would not be long after this journalistic shift occurred, that radio entered the picture. From Toronto, “radio coverage of hockey games in Canada first began when CFCA, a station created for publicity purposes by the Toronto Star, began to broadcast local amateur games in 1923” (p. 100). It was radio broadcasting of hockey that would set the stage for the Maple Leafs to become a nationally consumed commodity.

In 1927 Conn Smythe, a local businessperson and visionary hockey enthusiast, purchased the Toronto St. Pats for $160,000 (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). It was Smythe who renamed the team the Toronto Maple Leafs. Smythe saw broadcasting live hockey
games as a potential source of untapped revenue. However, in order to make that vision a reality, he would need a new arena. In 1929, Smythe sold the broadcasting rights of the Toronto Maple Leafs to Jack MacLaren, director of the MacLaren Advertising Company. In exchange, the agency would pay for the construction of a larger arena (Laba, 1992). MacLaren immediately began looking for companies that sought access to a national audience to financially back the broadcasts and eventually General Motors (GM) became the first official sponsor of the Toronto Maple Leafs (Schere & Whitson, 2009).

Maple Leaf Gardens opened to a sell out crowd on November 12, 1931 and Foster Hewitt presented the very first “General Motors Hockey Broadcast” to radio listeners (Schere & Whitson, 2009). Despite a 2-1 loss to the Chicago Blackhawks that first night, the Leafs went on to win the Stanley Cup their first season in the Gardens. The construction of Maple Leaf Gardens marked a dynamic shift in the consumption of hockey and as the new arena began to draw a “modernized” crowd, live hockey games became a social destination (Field, 2002). More women began to attend games and the public perception of Leafs hockey went from “night at the old barn” to “evening on the town.” This was Smythe’s exact desire from the outset, to increase attendance and revenue by altering the social perception of hockey. A clear success as numbers go, “in the first season in the new arena with 70 percent more capacity, gross revenue increased by more than 170 percent” (Field, p. 36).

As the Maple Leafs began the decade of the 1930s in their brand new corporate arena, they were entering a golden age. In January 1933, GM’s sponsored games were patched through to stations coast to coast, addressing a national Canadian audience for the first time (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993).
It was in that decade that they became a part of the national lore, their appeal cutting across all economic and cultural lines. From coast to coast Saturday night truly was hockey night in Canada as Canadian families huddled around their radios to hear Hewitt’s Maple Leafs Gardens broadcasts from the gondola (Houston, 1989, p. 20)

Brutal Years under Ballard

Conn Smythe had revolutionized the mass consumption of hockey in Toronto and established a team that was beloved across the country. Over time, “through radio, corporate sponsorship, and the revenues from advertising and broadcast rights, the business of hockey began to work the consumer landscapes” (Laba, 1992, p. 339). Indeed, when Harold Ballard assumed ownership of the Maple Leafs in 1972, it was only about business, for in his world “there [was] no place for the fans” (Houston, 1989, p. 234). Ballard was notorious for sparring with general managers and coaching staff throughout his reign. He concerned himself only with turning a quick profit, neglecting a plan for long-term stability (Hannigan, 2006). In August of 1972, Ballard was convicted of 47 counts of fraud and sentenced to nine years in prison, but served only three. He returned to his position of owner and the franchise continued to struggle. The Maple Leafs playing record was becoming characteristically poor, players were unhappy, and Ballard’s hands-on mismanagement continued to cause staffing disruptions. Even into the 1980s, Ballard refused to market the team properly and authors note how poor the quality and selection of Leafs merchandise was during this period (Houston, 1989; Hannigan, 2006).
It was Ballard who explicitly prioritized the corporatization of the team, as he was the first owner who began selling season ticket seats to corporations. By the late 1980s, in Maple Leaf Gardens “80 percent of season ticket seats belonged to corporations” (Houston, 1989). It was who Ballard introduced gold-level seating and private boxes and to the dismay of many fans, tore down Foster Hewitt’s iconic broadcasting gondola. The tricks he managed to turn resulted in Maple Leaf Gardens earning the nickname “the cashbox on Carlton,” however, the venue was not well suited to branding. After Ballard’s death in 1990, Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment Ltd. (MLSE) (formerly Maple Leaf Gardens Ltd.) began to consider the need for a new state of the art arena.

The Maple Leafs closed the Gardens the same way they opened them, in a game against the Chicago Blackhawks (which they also lost). The Air Canada Centre (ACC) opened on February 19, 1999, with the Leafs playing their first home game in the new rink the next day. Located in downtown Toronto, the building itself did not have the same community character as the Gardens, as the ACC is a stand alone structure, surrounded by parking lots, railroad tracks, and the crumbling and chronically congested Gardiner Expressway (Hannigan, 2006). Air Canada bought the naming rights from Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment for $40 million, in a contract that would be paid out over twenty years. The new branded space increased the seating capacity, had more concessions and at its center, a “huge Sony jumbo-tron was installed for more advertising throughout games” (Hannigan, 2006, p. 204).

The State of Things

Moving forward in a new arena, the Leafs continued to be a sell-out team regardless of the ever-worsening time gap between Stanley Cup wins. They also remain a staple of the
Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s *Hockey Night In Canada (HNIC)* despite what are becoming characteristically mediocre performances. The team’s last playoff series victory was in the spring of 2004, under the coaching skills of Pat Quinn. The 2004 post-season was also the last time the Leafs made the playoffs after a full 82-game regular season. Toronto made a brief first round playoff appearance in April 2013 against the Boston Bruins, following a shortened 48-game season following a lockout (Mirtel, 2013). Ownership has since changed too. In 2012 Rogers and Bell “jointly paid 1.3 billion […] to buy 75 percent of Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment” (Waddell, 2016, p. 42). The Toronto Maple Leafs are currently worth $1.4 billion (Ozanian, 2017), placing the team in second, behind the New York Rangers, on the list of the NHL’s wealthiest franchises.

After spending 10 years behind the bench with the Detroit Red Wings, the Maple Leafs managed to lure decorated coach Mike Babcock to their city in 2015. Babcock is now the highest paid coach in the NHL (Arthur, 2017). In 2016, another small miracle occurred as Toronto secured a first round, first overall draft pick from a trade with the Pittsburgh Penguins. The Maple Leafs drafted Auston Matthews on June 24, 2016. Matthews, along with a half dozen other unknown rookies, made the 2016-2017 Maple Leafs season a spectacle that left several scoring records shattered in its wake.

**Literature Review**

Typically sports teams thrive, financially speaking, when they are winning games. How is it that a team with such an underwhelming and (recently) undecorated past, maintains its position among the top three most profitable teams in a North American league of 31? While some may argue the frivolity that is fundamental to the consumption of mediated sport makes hockey an “unworthy” subject of study (Blake, 2010), hockey’s presence as
a cultural artifact in Canada presents a niche area in the struggle over dominance. As media conglomerates begin to invest in sport advertising, sport broadcasting, and eventually the teams themselves, they gain increasing control of the manufacture and dissemination of culturally relevant messages. Foundational theories of branding, of the imagined community, and the sport media complex will be discussed and weaved together throughout the final analysis.

The Imagined Community

Nationalism, as described by Benedict Anderson (1983), “is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (p. 3). Wars have been led under banners of nationalism throughout history. Much like the term “culture,” it is difficult to pin down a definitive definition of nationalism. For the purposes of this research, it is more valuable to look at Anderson’s constructions of “imagined communities” that build “the nation.” For Anderson, the nation

is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each live the image of their communion. (p. 6)

Nations are imagined as communities because they are conceived as deep, cultivating a sense of “horizontal comradeship.” It is not difficult to see the links between the imagined community of the nation-state and the imagined community of sports fandom. Whether examining a specific club’s following, or the imagined community inside the club’s home arena, one fan will never know every other fan. “Horizontal comradeship” is
the foundation of fandom, placing strangers on an equal footing based on their loyalty to a specific team.

Anderson is particularly relevant to this study as his work on the imagined community analyzes the role of newspapers in constructing the nation. Nationalism, according to Anderson, is culturally rooted in language. Newspapers, be they local or national, solidify language (i.e. the Montreal Gazette versus the Globe and Mail), and they further solidify the imagined community via the ritual of consuming the newspaper. Anderson describes this consumption as a mass ceremony “being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others whose existence he is confident, yet whose identity he has not the slightest notion” (p. 35). Consuming the daily newspaper roots the imagined world in daily life.

Print media requires symbols upon which to capitalize and build their narrative and readership followings. Visuals and symbols become totemic links in the imagined community. Visual media, especially front-page newspaper stories, are an avenue in which brands can assert their presence. In the case of this study, a person may not be a Maple Leafs fan, they may not live or operate in the Toronto area but they will be exposed to the Leafs. That is the power of the brand. You are forced to see them, which asserts the brand’s presence in both the social and cultural realm.

Roland Barthes, in his collection of essays Mythologies (1957), identifies myth as “a system of communication” (p. 261). A unique form, myth cannot be defined by its objects, meaning it is not about what information is said, but rather how it is conveyed. Myths do not evolve from nature, but are more precisely selected by history. In other words, people fabricate myths. However artificial myths may be, their power lies in their
ability to naturalize and normalize concepts. By assuming a look of generality, myth “makes itself look neutral and innocent” (p. 266).

As a part of semiology, myth is constructed based on the relationship of signs and signifiers. As it pertains to this research, hockey is the sign and identity is the signified. Barthes, who worked with the National Film Board of Canada in the early 1960s on a film about national sport which featured hockey (Zuurbier, 2016), cites sport as a one of many modes of representation of myth. Of Canada’s cultural relationship with hockey he also states, that “the great players are heroes, not stars” (p. 252).

Myth plays a crucial role in the construction of the imagined community, as myth “presuppose a unifying consciousness” (Barthes, 1957, p. 262). The unified consciousness is what binds and orients imagined communities. Serazio (2012) further explains, “the ritual function of newspapers binding communities also lend insight into sports journalism’s coverage, for perhaps nowhere more than in the sports pages are timeless myths renewed” (p. 315, emphasis added). Indeed, as my analysis shows, mythology was a device used by the Toronto Star during playoff coverage.

The imagined community is also held together by totemic links. The civic totem “in Émile Durkheim’s words ‘it is the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from others, the visible mark of personality’” (quoted in Serazio, 2012, p. 306). Signs and symbols (logos) of sports teams function as “vehicles of solidarity,” forging identity through affiliation. In sport, the team or franchise is the totem and “worshipers” of the totem express their devotion through unleashed commercial impulses (Serazio, 2012). Serazio provides reasoning to the sample selection as, “love flows most effusively when the totem is fertile, when the team reaps victory” (Serazio, p. 306). It is for this reason
that a playoff media sample was selected rather than a sample from the regular season, as
making the playoffs for the first time in 13 years was itself a victory for the Leafs. As
Leiss, Kline, Jhally & Botterill (2005) further explain:

The product has become a totem, a representation, of a clan or group that
we recognize by its activities and its members’ shared enjoyment of the
product. The response to consumption seems to be less concerned with the
nature of satisfaction than with its social meaning - the way it integrates the
individual into a consumption tribe. (p. 200)

Serazio examines various channels of attachment to a sports team, specifically the factors
that construct and sustain the imagined community of a fandom. The kin totem is familial
and cultivated through generations of loyalty. Parents raise their children as followers of
the teams they affiliate themselves with. The comparative totem is one that can be set
against rivals: “us” versus “them.” This subsequently strengthens the imagined
community by “otherizing” anyone who is not “us.” Both kin and comparative totemic
traits are present in the Toronto Maple Leafs organization.

Serazio further identifies journalism as the dominant purveyor of myth, which
moves spectators towards a totemic center. Sports journalism, newspapers especially,
have a tendency to replicate themes and narratives. Again, the newspaper is consumed in
a ritualistic fashion in the imagined community (Anderson, 1983). Media coverage of a
fan (for example, Toronto’s “Dart Guy” or the Vancouver Canuck’s “Green Men”) is the
closest to the totem that a person, or persons, can be (Figure 1.1 & 1.2). These fans
received attention because “the more you bought and decorated your body with the totem,
the closer you moved to some sacred center and the more a part of the group you displayed yourself to be” (Serazio, 2012, p. 309).

There is a gap in this literature. Serazio briefly addresses that “there is some degree of corporate manipulation and profit motive,” whereby, sport becomes “ever more a commodity sold to paying fans” (p. 318). Serazio fails to assess how much corporate manipulation is present, nor does he mention how many corporations can be involved in such manipulation.

By building a team up as a brand, corporations can create totemic symbols for mass consumption. Brands are mechanisms or institutions “that enable a direct valorization [...] of people’s ability to create trust, affect and shared meanings: their ability to create something in common” (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 236). A brand is built through advertising, marketing, product placements, staged events, and so on. The concepts of brand value and brand equity explain the brand’s social or cultural value: a form of “immaterial capital,” made up of subjective meanings. Consumers are active in the social constructions of both, and their “consumption produces a common in the form of a community” (Arvidsson, p. 242). Brands have woven themselves so deeply into everyday life that they “have become more than mere symbols, they have become objectifications of a particular way of living with commodities” (Arvidsson, 2013, p. 377).

Team vs. Brand

It is important to make the distinction at the outset, the difference between the Toronto Maple Leafs team and the Toronto Maple Leafs brand. In this research, the team is a more precise term, referring specifically to the current roster of players, the current head
coach, assistant coaches and so forth. The *brand* is the collective history of the team, former players, former championships, merchandise, personalities, affiliations, celebrity, and all the symbolism and myth from the beginning of the franchise to present. The term brand also brings the corporate nature of the organization to the fore. This study shall be focused on the brand.

The Toronto Maple Leafs brand is built on a winning tradition of 13 Stanley Cup championships, intense rivalry, with Montreal or Boston, powerful fans, and longevity (sustainability through World Wars, the depression, strikes, etc.) (Richelieu & Pons, 2006). Their fan base is not resigned to the city’s geography either. With a history that goes back to a time when they were one of only two Canadian teams in the NHL, the Maple Leafs were once “a glittering national treasure, as Canadian as prairie wheat fields and lonely northern lakes. They epitomized excellence and a winning tradition. In English Canada they were the country’s most popular team – in any sport” (Houston, 1989, p. 9).

**Publics vs. Community**

If the brand is the mechanism that creates lasting commonality, that commonality manifests itself as either a brand community or a brand public. “Community” implies a social formation characterized by interpersonal communication and interaction. According to Arvidsson & Caliandro (2016), “in brand communities, people form enduring social bonds around brands that add value to sustaining a common identity or experience” (p. 727). Brand communities highlight how much fans create and build up shared meanings around brands (or teams) externally from the brand itself. Members of a brand community are united by their devotion to the object they have in common.
(Arvidsson, 2013). Their participation in the brand community will be ongoing and is based on discussion and interactions with other members, which will develop into shared meanings of collective identity.

Brand publics, by contrast, are sustained by mediation rather than interaction. This mediation does not form the basis for public discussion or debate, as members do not directly interact with one another. Instead the public becomes a large organized media space of private perspectives that are publically voiced (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). The continuity of mediated interactions is what sustains the brand public as a whole, however its members “participate only once or twice. There are no core members who keep coming back regularly” (p. 743). The infrequency of individual participation is further characterized by ephemerality, authenticity, and visibility; people participating in a conversation simply for the sake of being seen as part of the conversation. The best example of this is the use of a Twitter hashtag. Consequentially, brand publics typically have more members and are larger than brand communities, but they lack the strong commonality of brand communities. Brand publics convey the idea of a community where a community does not exist in actuality, and its “members” have no expectation of one forming. Arvidsson & Caliandro use the example of the Louis Vuitton brand to illustrate their point. Louis Vuitton generates tens of thousands of posts on Twitter, organized through the hashtag #louisvuitton. These tweets are not indicative of how many people are purchasing products, but rather they indicate how many people loosely associate with the brand through social media. Within a brand public, users can interact with brands and identify with brands (through a hashtag), without ever making a purchase.
The brand public’s ephemerality is predicated on the fact that the public exists only as long as the mechanism of mediation is functional. So, for example, “when the newspaper ceases publishing, its public dissolves” (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016, p. 730). This is a defining characteristic of the brand public; that these weaker forms of association and communication cannot sustain themselves without the media devices that created them.

The formation of brand communities and brand publics is not binary, as “dimensions of brand public and dimensions of brand community can coexists empirically, or one might be more pronounced than the other in particular cases” (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016, p. 744). The Toronto Maple Leafs brand is such a case. The Leafs brand community does exist, however it has been eclipsed by the much larger Leafs brand public, which is increasingly characterized by more transitory membership. The Maple Leafs brand public will be discussed further in Chapter Four. The brand public relates to Anderson’s (1983) work because “the existence of interaction, if only among a select group of core members, allows for active participation as a possibility: it makes the brand community into an “imagined community” (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016, p. 729).

**Sport Media Complex**

What precisely is the role of sport then in this imagined community? Serazio notes sports fandom becomes “quasi-religious” as people organize themselves around symbols. Branding is a core aspect of the commercialization of sport, if not the most important aspect. Commercialization is one of three pillars of the sport-media complex, which shall further inform this paper.
The sport media complex examines and theorizes the dynamic relationship between sport organizations, media organizations and commercial interests, and the flow of revenue and content between each (Lefever, 2012). At the center of this triangle, are the fans/consumers (Figure 1.3). Jhally (2006) explains that there are two fundamental concepts driving the sport media complex:

(a) Most people do the vast majority of their sports spectating via the media (largely through television), so that the cultural experience of sports is hugely mediated, and (b) from a financial point of view, professional point of view, and, increasingly, collegiate point of view, sports are dependent upon media money for their very survival and their present organizational structure. (Jhally, 2006, p. 136)

Media organizations and commercial interests exert the most control exercising their power over viewing habits. They are able to change the rules of the game (in a literal sense), the playing schedule, the colour of equipment and jerseys so as to be better viewed on a screen. As Lefever (2012) observes, “for broadcasters, live coverage of sports events is important, because it gives them credibility and profile in the marketplace as well as lucrative audiences to advertisers” (p. 9). *Hockey Night In Canada*, for example, gives the CBC great cultural credibility.

In the digital media landscape, with the involvement of user-generated content, sports clubs have become multimedia companies themselves (Lefever, 2012). Media companies produce and present the content, and subsequently invest in controlling shares of the organization. The process of “Murdochisation” is identified by Lefever and
correlates to the actions of Rogers and Bell in purchasing a large share of the Maple Leafs in 2012. Murdochisation is

the process by which corporations primarily involved in mass media or communications appropriate and integrate into their own organizations and sports clubs. In doing so, the media groups gain access to and control of the competitive activities of the clubs, which they can distribute through their network. (Lefever, 2012, p. 20)

The increasing presence of corporations and brands at sporting events and the presence of sporting themes in ads is blurring the line between sport and advertising (Jhally, 2006). Ammirante (2009) identifies the NHL as both a monopoly and a monopsony. The league is a monopoly because of its control over the hockey market, dictating the prices that consumers will pay and “monopsony is essentially the mirror image of monopoly” (p. 191). Monopsonists are the sole consumer of a product and can thereby drive down the costs of what they consume. The resulting effect is that employers are put in a position of power, able to set wages “because there are no alternative employers in that field of work” (p. 191). Monopsony arguably caused the 2003-2004 lock-out, enraging hockey fans and damaging the NHL brand. The lockout exemplified the effects of the NHL monopsony: employers attempted to drive down the cost of player’s wages and a bargain with the players could not be reached. The season was cancelled and in the aftermath, the NHL had “alienated league employees and fans” (Batchelor & Formentin, 2008, p. 156). Ammirante is the only author who offered ideas on “resistance to commodifying pressures,” with ideas such as more effective revenue sharing, and the “radical” proposal to remove profit from sport altogether and operate a non-profit hockey league (2009).
In Field’s (2002) analysis of the shift away from participation towards spectatorship, he explores the difference between community sport spaces and commercial sport spaces. Commercial sport spaces are established by entrepreneurs and designed as spaces for mass consumption. These commercial sport spaces “represent the conversion of a traditional form of leisure into a capital-based entertainment form in which entrepreneurs spend or invest huge sums of money on sports structures and related ensemble elements” (Field, p. 47). Field adds a critical historical note about the Maple Leafs, that corporatization is in the organization’s blood. Even in the late 1920s, the board of directors was peppered with banking, mining, insurance, and petroleum tycoons.

Hannigan’s (2006) analysis of the transition from Maple Leaf Gardens to the Air Canada Centre highlights MLSE’s role in the sport media complex, as well as some of their branding strategies, many of which are based on the notion of “the nation.” After the move to the ACC, MLSE wanted to reassure its fan base that the past had not been forgotten, so branding shifted towards a form of “mediated nostalgia.” Hannigan defines mediated nostalgia as based on “a socially constructed discourse that conflates nationalism, recollections of a happier time, and the success of Canadian professional sporting teams” (p. 205). Further building on the concept of nationalism, in 2004 MLSE launched the Leafs Nation Fan Club, a mediated community of Leafs fans across Canada.

With “Hall of Mirrors,” Waddell (2016) explores the contemporary landscape of corporate concentration in Canadian sports broadcasting. He focuses on the ownership monopolies of Rogers and Bell Canada Enterprises. Both companies own a massive 75 percent share in the Maple Leafs as well as other professional sport teams, sports venues, radio stations, specialty websites, and bars. The chapter discusses the contradictions and
risks of having two conglomerates vertically integrate and own the team, own the broadcaster, and be the broadcaster. Waddell argues that this is a developing phenomena, as the big continue to get bigger: “The $5.2 billion, twelve-year deal that Rogers signed with the NHL in November 2013 will allow the CBC to keep Saturday night hockey until the end of the 2017–18 season, but it will simply take a feed of the game from Rogers” (p. 42). With Rogers and Bell each with an equal share in the Leafs, fans get caught in the middle and in the haze of confusion “the broadcasting split leaves fans in the dark, for instance, about which Leaf games are on which network and when” (p. 43). This proved a real problem during Game Six of the Maple Leaf’s playoff run on April 23rd, 2017. CBC was not given the rights to broadcast this game, and it played only on Sportsnet, a premium channel owned by Rogers. What was extremely troubling for fans and viewers in this instance is that the Leafs were eliminated in Game Six.

The “hall of mirrors” referenced in the title refers to concentrated power. The mirrors bounce events back and forth off one another all contained within the Rogers or Bell hallway. The conglomerates control whatever is reflected and they can be selective in what they choose to reflect (Waddell, 2016). Waddell’s work will inform the content analysis of the sample, and provides a framework of critical questions to keep in mind when coding, regarding journalistic objectivity in the face of looming corporate media concentration.

Robinson’s (2012) account of fandom under the blue and white banners of the Maple Leafs has a contemporary context, as well as a journalistic quality to it. Robinson observes that “the voice of the so-called national media has a Toronto-bias” (p. 142) which highlights the corporate influences at work in the city of Toronto. That influence
exists within the Maple Leaf’s commercial sports space as well, for “the vast majority of people occupying lower bowl seats are doing so because they have some sort of connection to a corporation or business that owns the seats” (Robinson, 2012, p. 197). This is so prevalent that the Air Canada Centre has been widely labeled a “stale atmosphere” for hockey.

Part of the Toronto-bias Robinson (2012) mentions likely comes from the fact that Hockey Night in Canada, and in particular the “Coaches Corner” segment, is broadcast live from Toronto. It is important to point out that HNIC is Canada’s longest running television program (Maciel & Nater, 2011), and the fact that the Leafs are usually the headers for Saturday night. For the 2017/2018 hockey season, the Leafs will be featured on 23 out of 27 Saturday night broadcasts on CBC.

**Imagined Hockey Communities**

In Canada, in the Canadian imagined community, the game of hockey has been presented as a national symbol. National symbols are both “reductive and exclusive. They are reductive because they imply that the essence of a nation can be distilled into a single image; they are exclusive because choosing an image for a nation means not choosing another one” (Blake, 2010, p. 18). Blake acknowledges that the game of hockey may not be loved by all Canadians, but it is indeed recognized by all Canadians as being Canadian. Hockey is a cultural product that helps build sporting identities. The general perception is that, “Canada ‘has’ hockey, while the United States ‘has’ baseball – even though both games are widely played in both countries. It is because of these conceived spheres of sporting influence that losing to the United States in baseball is acceptable; losing to them in hockey is regarded as shameful” (p. 30). The collective, shared
perspective (Hills & Kennedy, 2009) is that hockey is “our game,” and time and time
again it has been successfully branded as such.

Gruneau & Whitson (1993) provide a detailed historical overview of the cultural
significance of hockey as a Canadian past time, beginning with the game’s origins in the
mid to late 1880s. Their research then goes on to detail the establishment of the National
Hockey League. In contrast with the large body of hockey scholars who argue that the
game began to be “Americanized” in the 1980s, Gruneau and Whitson point out that
corporatization and Americanization go back to the late 1920s and argue that “like it or
not, profiting from the game is as Canadian as the beaver” (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993, p.
27).

That being said, the first NHL expansion in 1967 brought six new teams to the
league and not one landed in Canada, much to the outrage of Canadian fans who had
been the backbone of support for so long. American companies were powerful owners,
with The Walt Disney Company owning the Anaheim Mighty Ducks and Blockbuster
video owning the Florida Panthers. Disney subsequently made an entire movie franchise
in order to try and generate a growing interest in the sport in the United States. Batchelor
& Formentin (2008) investigate a missed opportunity for Americanization: by the time
Americans cared about Wayne Gretzky (when he was traded to Los Angeles), the NHL
had already missed their chance to ride Wayne’s coattails to sponsorship heaven. The
NHL has the lowest monetary value of all of the Big Four sports, each of which barely or
completely omit the Canadian market by not having Canadian teams. (The Big Four are
Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, the National Football
League, and the National Hockey League. The NHL has seven Canadian teams, the NBA
and MLB each have one, both based in Toronto. The NFL has no team presence in Canada).

I have discussed how nationalism is built externally and how it is implemented in sport, but we have not discussed the two together. The role of the CBC has been crucial in establishing hockey as a part of Canadian identity. The CBC production of *Hockey: A People’s History*, for example, was a ten episode series that chronicled the modern game’s history. Curiously, the program scarcely mentioned the broadcasting corporation itself, or its role in establishing hockey radio broadcasting deals as far back as the 1920s. The concept and the “cultural importance of hockey ‘for the people’ was being developed and promoted by the CBC and its nation-building mandate. Thus the state was naturalizing its role in making the ‘people,’ even while obscuring its presence in that object” (Cormack & Cosgrave, 2013, p. 102). Branding hockey as “Canada’s game” takes the idea of nationalism and commercializes it to become *corporate nationalism*. Advertising (and branding) “becomes a key site through which the process and consequences of corporate nationalism can be examined” (Jackson, 2016, p. 4), while also being a site through which dominance can be defended and reinforced.

To conclude this literature review, Zuurbier’s (2016) work ties the sport media complex, the imagined community, the Maple Leafs, and hockey as Canada’s cultural signifier altogether. “Cultivating Distinction Through Hockey as a Commodity,” provides an examination of the “uncomfortable alignment between hockey fans and Canadian identity that is created through consumption” (p. 263). This work is central to guiding the analysis of the *Toronto Star*, looking at how the game of hockey’s cultural potency has been highly commodified to suit the professional version. Zuurbier further makes
reference to Anderson (1983) and provides an examination of the media’s role in this cycle of commodification.

To begin with and to complement Gruneau & Whitson (1993), Zuurbier assesses hockey’s significance as Canadian cultural currency and a powerful component of national identity, as well as the game’s professional evolution from a “Saturday night ritual that captivated the home arenas, living rooms, and local pubs of generations of Canadians has grown into a multi-billion dollar, multi-media industry” (p. 247). As a cultural signifier hockey is presented as one that is “near universal” in creating contemporary national identity. Under this broad stroke, reasons to participate in the game are unique to each person, however, “actually playing hockey is of little to no interest” (p. 257). This lack of interest is largely due to the economic barriers and costs of participation that are “unattainable for the majority of Canadian families” (p. 253), and the additional fact that professional hockey has been constructed as the most authentic version of the game and is thus the most visible. This is problematic as it reinforces the high costs of participating in the most “authentic version” of the sport, for example, going to see games in person or purchasing branded NHL clothing.

The consumption of broadcast hockey creates an imagined equality via the separation of spectators from professionals; “everyone is equal in that they are not playing” (Zuurbier, 2016, p. 252). Viewers may be separated by differing team loyalties but their imagined equality leads to a version of what Anderson (1983) theorized: the imagined hockey community. Consumers are all at once affiliated with the “people they’re watching the game with, the others watching in the same location, friends colleagues with whom they talk hockey, any hockey-related online or offline
communities they may participate in, the cities and regions represented by team or players, and the country itself” (p. 249), without ever knowing all the members.

Naturally such a vast community, despite their disconnect, has a huge amount of monetary value, and their consumption must be fostered and supported and allowed to flourish. To sustain this consumption fans are absolutely saturated with hockey media, to the point where Zuurbier finds the emergence of a “media ghetto.” The media ghetto is especially relevant to the Maple Leafs organization as they are the only team in the NHL with their own dedicated station, “Maple Leafs TV.” The media ghetto, similar to an echo chamber but much more concentrated, reinforces professional hockey’s prominence: “The hockey media ghetto is an enclosed self referential territory that fans can explore infinitely while remaining completely encapsulated in the spectacle of professional hockey” (p. 256). The increasing density of the media ghetto, especially for Maple Leafs fans, is further problematically spurred by the involvement of Bell and Rogers. These two media giants gain “an enormous amount of relatively low-cost content that can reach across the ever-growing landscape” (p. 261). With the Maple Leaf’s value and popularity as a professional hockey team, the top priority for Rogers and Bell is “encouraging increased consumption of the Maple Leafs and everything around them, no matter how abstracted” (p. 262).

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, Zuurbier poses one final question that influenced this research. If myths of hockey, both imagined and realized, are ways of setting down cultural roots, then what do we as Canadians “want these roots to grow into as we cultivate them?” (p. 264).
CHAPTER TWO

Methodology & Sample

As Anderson (1983) theorizes, the newspaper solidifies the imagined community through ritual consumption, as millions of citizens consume the same news stories each day. This is further supported by Deacon, Pickering, Golding, and Murdoch (2007), who write that the “consumption of news narrative is regularized and routine” (p. 180). Serazio (2012) cites in his study of totemic links in sports fandoms, a totem (team) is “most fertile” and most profitable when it is thriving. A team bound for a championship, for example, can be considered thriving. The Toronto Maple Leafs entrance in April 2017 to the Stanley Cup Playoffs marks the first time the team has made playoffs after a regular 82-game season since 2004, and their first post-season appearance since 2013. Thus, the 2017 playoff run was selected for study.

Print newspaper was chosen over digital news because of its strong historical connection to professional hockey in Canada. As previously stated, it was the Toronto Star’s affiliate radio station that began to popularize live game broadcasts. It was also sports journalists that first began reporting beyond the bare minimum of scores and statistics, detailing “the most skilled players in a mythic style of language” (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993, p. 85). Serazio (2012) furthers this argument by noting that newspapers specifically are the dominant purveyors of myth for sport spectators. There is also an enduring iconic quality that is associated with the front page of a newspaper. They have the ability to freeze a specific moment in history and if they are collected and presevered, can accumulate value over time. For this reason, it is not uncommon to save the
newspaper from the day your child is born, or find front-page newspapers framed and sold as sports memorabilia.

The *Toronto Star* was selected over the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post* due to the fact that the *Star* is the team’s “local newspaper.” The *Toronto Star* is unique in the fact that it is a local newspaper with a national audience. It has the largest circulation of any daily paper in Canada with an average weekly circulation of 2,231,338 copies (Newspaper circulation report, 2015).

The media sample for the following analysis is made up of 13 days of *Toronto Star* print newspaper coverage of the Maple Leafs’ 2017 playoff run. Data were collected on April 9, 2017 and on April 13, 2017 through April 24, 2017. April 9th was included because it reported on the Leaf’s 5-3 win against the Pittsburgh Penguins on April 8th, which secured the number eight playoff spot for Toronto. The playoff series against the Washington Capitals began on April 13th. Within this sample, a total of 59 articles were analyzed, from the newspaper as whole, not solely the sports section. A second, smaller collection of digital new stories and media metrics on the topic of “Dart Guy” were also analyzed. The sample size is small enough to be manageable for a single coder, while remaining dense enough for a rigorous analysis.

Content Analysis is ideal for the “massness” of mass media and so Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can allow the analyst to collect more specific details that support broader arguments and patterns. CDA specializes in “media language, advertising/promotional culture” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 24), which is well suited to this study, as it looks at how the *Toronto Star* promotes Leafs culture. Much like content analysis, CDA may not provide a concrete answer to the question but it can however
“enable one to understand the conditions behind the specific problem” (McGregor, 2004, p. 8). These methods are well suited for each other in this analysis because they each help to identify patterns. That is essentially what this research seeks to identify: thematic patterns in Star coverage. Content analysis is well suited for broad patterns, while CDA is best for finer patterns. Together, themes become visible as the patterns emerge.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method “well suited to dealing with the ‘massness’ of mass media” (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 119), aiming to produce a big picture. The strength of the method lies in its ability to view the “sample as a whole in a rigorous manner, to detect patterns of similarities and differences” (Leiss et al., 2005, p. 166). Further, content analysis is “based on the notion of objectivity” (Kirby, Graves, & Reid, 2010, p. 155) and is well suited for the study of stable content. Physical copies of print news can be considered stable due to the fact that, unlike digital news stories, once circulated, the physical copies cannot be updated or edited.

Content analysis is a flexible method, one that is both textual and visual, which is an advantage in analysing the composition of a newspaper’s front-page photographs as well as editorial content. According to Bryman, Bell, & Teevan (2009), content analysis allows for multiple research questions to be posed. This is an exhaustive method, aiming to “provide a systematic means for quantifying textual and thematic features across a large number of texts” (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 132). The method functions by analysing multiple layers within media text, looking to uncover hidden meanings by analysing both manifest content (obvious themes) and latent content (underlying themes) (Bryman et al., 2009).
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

If content analysis is the tool for a broad examination of mass media, CDA is the fine-toothed comb to accompany and complement it. Huckin (1997) notes that the texts that matter are the ones that we encounter in our daily lives; all the more reason to study a daily newspaper. Language is never value free, and CDA can be used to peel back the layers of a text to draw attention to power imbalances that may be presented as natural, normal, or common knowledge (McGregor, 2004). Historically CDA has been characteristically committed to political and ethical issues, with the method going beyond mere description (Blommaert, 2005). The goal of CDA is to help uncover “ideological assumptions” (McGregor, 2004, p. 3). According to Huckin (1997), CDA is a highly context sensitive method, and as he writes, “it tries to point out those features of a text that are most interesting from a critical perspective, those that appear to be textual manipulations serving non-democratic purpose” (p. 81).

Huckin’s (1997) practical outline for performing critical discourse analysis states that a text should be read in two stages: first as a typical reader, and then a second time, with a critical lens. A double reading of a text allows the analyst to mentally compare texts to one another (McGregor, 2004), and for this study, look for patterns in coverage as the sample progressed day-to-day. With the second read, the analyst looks critically at the text as a whole, making note of the genre, framing, and any visual aids. At this stage, one must consider what information is foregrounded or presented as more important, what is omitted completely, and what information is taken for granted, or presupposed. A text is then analyzed at a “sentence-by-sentence” level. Here, the analyst looks at topicalization, specifically how topic sentences support the text’s framing; agent-patient relations which
identify who in the text is presented as having power and who is not. At the sentence-by-sentence level, the analyst must also be looking for the omission of agents and insinuations. Finally, at the level of words and phrases, labels, metaphors, and modality are taken into account. Modality “refers to the tone of statements as regards their degree of certitude and authority” (Huckin, 1997, p. 87).

For the purpose of this study, CDA was predominantly done at the “text as a whole” level. Genre, or “text type,” was looked at in regard to the work of sports journalists conforming to the typical top-down standard of news reporting, in which there is no apparent bias and “information is presented in descending order of importance” (Huckin, 1997, p. 89). Genre belongs to the institution of journalism (McGregor, 2004), and the manipulation of it “becomes a means through which the institution extends power” (p. 5). The institution in this case is of course the Toronto Star.

Framing can be described as the angle or slant given to a particular news story, any point of perspective that guides or shapes a narrative. For this analysis it also includes visual elements such as bolded titles that draw a reader’s attention. At the outset, because this is an examination of the home team’s “local paper,” it was expected from the beginning that framing would be a powerful device through playoff reporting. Foregrounding refers to “the emphasis on certain concepts and their textual prominence” (McGregor, 2004, p. 7). It is a device that can be used to influence a reader’s opinion based on the placement of information. Foregrounding works on multiple levels within texts, and as such was examined on a broad scale of the sample as a whole, and then on a more specific text-by-text thematic basis. Foregrounding and framing overlapped significantly through the sample as well.
Backgrounding, the opposite of foregrounding, refers to a lack of emphasis, where potentially important information is placed at the end of an article, or is only mentioned in passing. Omission is when pertinent facts are left out completely, leaving the reader with less than the full story. Omission has the potential to be incredibly problematic, as unpublished information is not subject to the scrutiny of the reader (Huckin, 1997).

For the purpose of this study, modality and agent-patient relations were merged into a single category, referring to sources quoted by writers, which included coaches, players, and fans, and whether or not those sources were situated to convey a position of power or a lack of it. Topicalization was coded for in conjunction with mythology due to the fact that opening lines of stories were often loaded with myth. By topicalizing myth, “the writer creates a perspective or slant that influences the reader’s perception” (McGregor, 2004, p. 6). At the words and phrases level, metaphors were often found in these mythical themed articles.

**Operationalization**

According to Deacon et al. (2007), “the front page of a newspaper is always carefully composed. It is not stitched together randomly like a patchwork quilt” (p. 179).

Following a preliminary examination of all 13 papers, a coding schedule was developed. Coding allows for a thorough analysis of trends as well as an interpretive dimension (Deacon et al., 2007). The coding schedule (Figure 2.1) will create a framework for a thematic critical discourse content analysis. Thematic structures “orient a text around a central theme or strand of related themes running through a story” (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 174). A theme analysis will bring out relationships between the 59 stories in the data sample. The papers will be analysed chronological order.
The coding manual will document several elements of the Toronto Star that may reveal a bias or specific slant within the playoff coverage. Placement within the paper as well as placement on the front page will be counted (Figure 2.2). The “news schema”, that is the “patterned movement,” of each story, beginning with the headline and moving through the main event and sources referenced (Deacon et al., 2007) will be taken into account. Manifest content, such as composition and page layout will be counted and will include an analysis of the visuals used. Stories will be coded for genre, framing, foregrounding, backgrounding, omission, mythology, and sources. Lastly, intertextuality will be examined from a day-to-day perspective and also within the sample as a whole.

Not every concept is equally useful and CDA analysts may select the tools they see fit for focusing on specific features of texts. Huckin (1997) outlines 11 elements of CDA, with time being a factor for the completion of this research, not elements were coded for. Some were combined and hybridized into one category. Presupposition was not coded for because it is inherent in this type of journalism. Each text presumes that the reader knows at least something about the Maple Leafs. As the playoffs progressed, all the stories presupposed that readers were keeping up and watching games. Further, writers presuppose that readers are familiar with the team’s roster, as they do not have the physical page space to reintroduce each player every time they are written about.

**Methodological Critique**

For critical discourse analysts, “the task of such analysis is to examine relationships between internal dynamics of written texts and the social organization in which such texts achieve circulation” (Deacon et al., 2007, p. 118). Although content analysis is an advantageously flexible method, it can be difficult to answer deep “why?” questions; at
best the results will be speculation. The disadvantage to coding is that it can be difficult to shift back and forth from analyzing specific sentences, to stories as a whole, finally to the paper as a whole. The advantage to coding on the other hand is that is can be replicated in a further future study. The following analysis will be organized thematically, beginning with overall trends.
CHAPTER THREE

Series Overview

The Toronto Maple Leafs played six games against the Washington Capitals beginning Thursday April 13th through to Sunday April 23rd, 2017. Five of the six games went into overtime periods. The Maple Leafs lost Game One, won Games Two and Three, but lost their last three games consecutively (see Figure 3.1). The Maple Leafs may have ended their four-year playoff drought, however, they still have not won a playoff series since 2004.

Over the course of this series, the Toronto Star wrote about the team everyday, producing a total of 57 published stories (two stories were published Sunday April 9th for a complete sample total of 59). These stories were authored primarily by five members of the Star’s sports section staff: Kevin McGran (15), Rosie DiManno (12), Dave Feschuk (10), Bruce Arthur (6), and Mark Zwolinski (6). Four pieces were written by staff members from other sections of the Star, and five articles were “imported” from the Washington Post, The New York Times, The Canadian Press, and The Associated Press. Maple Leafs playoff stories were not limited to the sports section and appeared in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Business, and front section of the paper. In 13 days the Maple Leafs made the front page of the newspaper six times, and they appeared on the front page of the sports section everyday day. Based on the fact that the Maple Leafs were able to briefly hold a lead in the series, it was expected that there would be some manner of change in coverage following Game Three, and a change again when the team fell behind.
Paper as a Whole

When looking at news stories, the traditional journalistic standard is objective, top-down reporting, with information presented in descending order of importance, and free of apparent bias. For this paper, a thematic analysis addressed how the Toronto Star’s texts conformed to those traditional notions. Perhaps this is an idealized view of the current state of journalism, however, this view is in line with what the Star mandates for itself in their Statement of Principles. Further, I hold the six main Star contributors to a higher standard, as they are long-time salaried employees with benefits and pensions, and not struggling journalists forced to publish content for free.

The work of Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, and Legnante (2012), which provides an explanation on the concepts of “hard” and “soft” news, came to inform this analysis. Although there is no set or solidified definition for either, hard news by their estimation is time sensitive, and must be reported on promptly before it obsolesces. Hard news is also episodic, and can provide information on a portion of a developing story. Both of these points are relevant to sports reporting for if a game win goes unreported promptly, readers will go elsewhere for that information. Hockey, and a playoff series especially, would create episodic reporting as each game is breaking news in the series narrative.

Soft news, by contrast, is not under any particular time pressure aside from standard printing deadlines. It tends to focus on celebrity or personality stories rather than be centred around an actual event. Reinemann et al., (2012) came to be a large influence on this analysis as quite unexpectedly, a large percentage of the articles analysed fell into the category of soft news.
Only about 25% of the stories published (15 out of 59 total) adhered to a traditional top-down “hard” news format. This occurred exclusively on days directly following games. In addition to being a characteristic of hard news, as mentioned, this is the time when people are most interested. These are also the days when the publication is most likely to get the attention of passive fans or readers. These stories were thoroughly detailed and chronological, and attempted to convey the drama of the game. For example, following Game Three Arthur wrote, “the Capitals scored fast, then again, and for the first time in the series the Leafs felt outclassed” (A1, April 18). Arthur was the only reporter to write objective post-game pieces that were featured in the front section of the Star. However, a pattern in the research quickly emerged where not every story following a game day was written traditionally. Stories that followed Arthur’s lead would make an attempt at top-down objectivity, but got weaker so as to avoid repetition. As the April 18th coverage illustrates, stories seemed to get “watered-down” the further into the section one read.


A similar “watering-down” trend appeared in the sample as a whole. The further from game day, the softer the Star reports became. As Reinemann et al. (2012) confirm, these stories were focused on personality and were primarily there for the purpose of keeping interest and attention up throughout the playoffs. These articles were less about analysis
and more about embellishing and re-hashing what had been reported on the day previous. Authors included more quotes and opinions from coaches and players to fill up their space, diverging away from objective factual reporting.

A handful of these more personality-based stories were mildly relevant to the Maple Leaf’s playoff series. In particular, reporting on Auston Matthews’ nomination for the Calder Trophy (awarded to the NHL’s rookie of the year). Matthews had a strong season and the event of his nomination and his reaction were notable for the franchise. However, these mildly relevant stories were far and away outnumbered by irrelevant “filler” pieces.

What is meant by “filler” is that stories were the softest, only meant to fill the pages and maintain readers’ interest. Title examples of this include: “Leafs find room for fun, with reservations;” “Grand Leaf ushers are walking monuments;” “Rivals Nylander and Backstrom go way back;” and “Fan’s fantasy: Four teams, four games, four reasons to hope.” These examples highlight the trends in off-day reporting, which were characterized by themes of off-ice brotherly love, teamwork, historical mythologies of the Maple Leafs of the past, and rivalries and friendships between both players and coaches. These articles provided no information or narratives relevant to the Maple Leafs’ playoff game play.

Some filler pieces that appeared were stories that objectively had no place in the section whatsoever. They were better classified as entertainment pieces, many of which will be discussed in later sections. These stories were tailored to specifically fit into the Maple Leafs narrative. “Tales of Barilko’s Cup heroics and tragic death still resonates,”
“Coaches take friendly rivalry to another level,” and “View from Washington: Speedy Schmidt” are title examples that illustrate this practice.

Sports may not be a “democratic issue” in the eyes of the *Star*. Authors writing in this section can be more flexible, and so, to a certain extent, some filler is to be expected. The problem with filler in this sample however, is the disproportionate quantity of it, and how this volume of softer reports affects coverage in the rest of the sports section. It is important to note that at the same time the Leafs were beginning their playoff push, the Toronto Raptors basketball team entered the first round of the NBA playoffs as well. The Raptors, much more than the Leafs, better represent the racial diversity of Toronto, and by extension, Canada. As I have outlined previously, basketball is a much more financially accessible sport than hockey. “If there’s a team that represents Canada at large, it isn’t a hockey team: it’s the Toronto Raptors” (Teitel, April 15, A11).

The Raptors opened their series against the Milwaukee Bucks on April 15th at the Air Canada Centre in Toronto, and would eventually go on to win the series on April 27th. The 2016/2017 season was the fourth consecutive playoff appearance for the Raptors, yet the basketball team received considerably less front-page press coverage and editorial coverage from the *Star* than the hockey team. The Maple Leafs made the front page of the *Toronto Star* with a large colour image and headline five times in the sample. In addition, the Maple Leafs appeared on the top of the front page in small banner image on April 9th. On three different days during the playoff series (April 16, 20 and 24) the hockey headline was printed in blue instead of black ink (Figure 3.2). Arthur was the only *Star* author out of the six to have content published in the front section (April 14, 18, 20, 24). The Toronto Raptors did not make a front-page appearance (the first of only two
in the sample) until April 21st, six days into their own playoff series. The basketball team appeared in three front-page top banner photos, in comparison to the Leaf’s one (Figure 3.2).

When it came to sharing the front page of the sports section, the pattern of inequality continued. April 15th and 16th were the only days where S1 was evenly split between both MLSE teams. The Maple Leafs made the front page of the sports section all 13 days of the sample, and in nine instances took up 50% of the space on front page or more. In contrast, Raptors editorials of equal size appeared on S1 five times.

Editorial content within the section was also extremely uneven. In comparison to the 59 Maple Leafs stories, the Raptors only had 27 articles published during this time. Lastly, Raptors editorials came after the Maple Leafs stories 100% of the time. These observations illustrate that the Star heavily foregrounded Maple Leafs coverage over the Raptors.

Rosie DiManno: In a League of Her Own

The six main Toronto Star authors who covered playoffs took turns filling a number of stylistic roles. As noted, Arthur took the lead for front-page stories, McGran produced the highest number of stories overall, and Feschuk, DiManno, and Zwolinski provided various pieces placed throughout the section. Rosie DiManno’s playoff work however, was very unique in the fact that her style of writing absolutely drips with mythology. Of her 12 total pieces, each one was coded for myth. In fact, DiManno bookended the sample with myth on April 9th (day 1), and April 24th (day 13). To illustrate, here are her opening remarks from her April 9th article:
Prone in his crease, eerily still on the ice. Skating slowly and gingerly off the ice, disappearing down the tunnel into concussion protocol limbo. And there the fate of the Maple Leafs seemed to hang, in the penultimate game of the season: Limbo. With a perfect storm of woe brewing. (DiManno, April 9, S5)

The language reads more like spoken-word poetry, from the selection of descriptive words, to the abrupt splits in her sentence structure. DiManno further described the game from April 18th as a “Ventricle pulsing 4-3 loss that put Washington back in the drivers seat. Clutching, though. Double-clutching” (S2). She also penned the story of Frederik Andersen’s connection to a Hans Christian Andersen fairytale that was a prominent piece in the “Be-leaf” frame that will be discussed later in this chapter.

DiManno was the one author out of all six, who most frequently adopted the term “kidlets” when describing the young Maple Leaf’s players, making her a predominant contributor to the “Under dog vs. Alpha dog” frame. At the conclusion of the series she wrote, “the Leafs will push back their chairs from the table now, the grown-ups table. Kids no more and we’ll probably miss that about them in years ahead” (April 24, S1).

This leads us into our main analysis, for DiManno was not the only author to dip her pen in the inkpot of mythology. Through the sample, four major themes emerged, each one mythologically potent: Winning Tradition, Be-Leaf, Inherent Violence, and Depoliticized Power. We begin with the “winning tradition.”

The Winning Tradition

Most myths that appeared were built on the Maple Leafs branding strategy of the “winning tradition” (Richelieu and Pons, 2006). The “grand Leafs ushers” article from The New York Times detailed a few characters working behind the scenes within the
Maple Leafs franchise and what the playoffs meant to them. The article was loaded with embellishments of the “glory days of Maple Leaf Gardens” and legends that have walked the halls there and in the ACC. Every usher interviewed was in his mid to late 70s and each was romanticized as a legend as well. These ushers represent a very small subsection of “die hard Leafs fans” but in reality the ushers do this job because it is the only way to get in the front door.

Bill Barilko came up in the sample more than once. He was a young Leafs forward in the 1950s who famously scored an overtime goal in the Stanley Cup final in 1951, before disappearing that summer on a fishing trip in Northern Ontario. Barilko has been mythologized as the Maple Leafs’ tragic hero due to the fact that the team did not win another Stanley Cup until his remains were discovered in 1962. The story of Barilko from the sample did not coincide with the anniversary of Barilko’s death nor was it attached to any new information pertaining to the crash that killed him over six decades ago. His presence in the Star was there to reinforce existing myths and extend them to a younger demographic of fans. The article described Barilko with tremendous sentiment, as “the kid with a heart as big as an ice rink and as tough as the granite beneath his hometown’s soil” (Shea, April 16, S3). A similar mythical romanticism was present in an article about current Leafs rookie Mitch Marner. Mike Babcock was quoted saying “no one loves hockey more than Mitch Marner” (Zwolinski, April 23, S2). As Barthes wrote, myth makes itself look innocent, and nothing is more sweet and childlike than having a heart as big as an ice rink. The old myths are present, so the new myths may build off their potency.
Playoff Underdogs

Framing was a powerful device for constructing the theme of winning tradition. The theme immediately shone through the frame of the Leafs as “underdogs.” This framing first appeared on April 13th and was used in a number of ways that carried through until the last day of coverage. The Maple Leafs were the 8th seed in the eastern conference, taking on the top seed team, a point that was heavily foregrounded in the early days of the sample. Their lack of playoff experience also made them an underdog team.

The youth of the team was used to frame them as underdogs as well, creating a “young guys vs. big guys” narrative, rather than a “good guys vs. bad guys” narrative. It was well documented that the Maple Leafs had the only all-rookie line in the playoffs. The terms “youngsters,” “kidlets,” and, “fledglings,” were recycled by all authors so frequently that the narrative began to sound like Emilio Estevez and the Might Ducks vs. Washington.

The emphasis on youth shifted through the sample, and was not always positive. Through Games Two and Three (when Washington trailed in the series) the youngsters were “leading” the team. The underdogs were framed as worthy competitors only up until the losses began and the series was tied. At that point, Toronto’s youth became their Achilles heel. On April 20th McGran wrote of the Leafs 5-4 loss that they, “played like the young inexperienced squad they are” (McGran, April 20, S2). As the Leafs were pushed further towards elimination in Game Six, the frame shifted yet again, and on April 23rd Feschuk wrote that the two teams had been evenly matched the entire time. Feschuk even went as far to say that the Leafs had the upper hand at that point despite the series
scoreboard reading 3-2 Washington. Feschuk’s headline, “Caps right where the Leafs want them” was framing that bordered on delusion, as the Capitals had a two-game safety net, and for the Maple Leafs it was win or the season is over.

Foregrounding the youth of the Maple Leafs players supported the underdog frame, however not all the “youngsters” were presented in the same way. There was, for example, a disparity between stories focusing on Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner. Matthews was described as the “bedrock of the new Leafs era” (Arthur, April 22, S1). On April 22nd, Feschuk wrote that Marner was “not preforming well under playoff pressure”. Ironically, the following day, DiManno wrote in “Marner keeping eyes on prize” (S3), that Marner had been wrongly criticized throughout the playoffs, without acknowledging that some of that criticism was coming from her colleagues. The article, of which Marner was the main subject, labelled him “the teenage-leaf” and made a condescending reference to his appearance in that he “hardly looks grown up at all, and why isn’t he at the mall manically texting his teen pals or doing his algebra homework instead of contesting in the Stanley Cup playoffs?” (DiManno, April 21). Auston Matthews’ Calder Trophy nomination was mentioned in the Marner article, but he did not receive any comments on his stature, nor did he share the label “teenage Leaf.” Matthews was not subjected to such condescension about his age, even though he is in fact younger than Mitch Marner.

The winning tradition was built further as the Star consistently foregrounded success over failure. This can be expected in some capacity as it is the team’s “local” paper. However, even following losses writers were more likely to discuss the few things that went right rather than the things that went wrong. Keeping up with the Capitals and
the ability to take games to overtime was more heavily reported on than areas where players needed to improve. Once the series was tied 2-2 however, Maple Leaf mistakes began to come to the foreground more, but Star writers were never openly or outwardly critical.

It is understandable that the team’s local paper would want to highlight the good moments and downplay the bad moments, but that is not how objective news reporting is supposed to work. It certainly would never work in the current affairs section of a paper, or the business section. The backgrounding of errors became problematic as the Star forgave numerous bad plays and brushed many others away, while repetitively encouraging its readers to believe in the team. A striking example of this came before the playoffs began, on April 9th with the article title “Exciting squad survives Gardiner own goal plus Andersen injury to end drought.” Jake Gardiner has been playing for the Maple Leafs for seven years and he scored on his own net, yet somehow, that ghastly error got lost in the flurry of celebration that the Leafs were retuning to the playoffs.

Bad plays and penalties were either backgrounded or omitted and the Maple Leafs’ habit of giving up leads was mentioned only in passing. The chronic persistence of this pattern would likely have been a good basis for an article unto itself, but this was the type of unbiased, critical reporting the Star was missing. Veteran player opinions were backgrounded as well and players like Brian Boyle, with years of playoff appearances, were rarely quoted despite arguably being the best “experts” on the subject.

Pressure Points

Framing Washington as the team under pressure was a prominent frame early in the series. As the games progressed it became harder to maintain, as pressure shifted onto the
Maple Leafs to stay in the playoffs. Regardless, readers were bombarded with reassuring facts about all of the skeletons in the Capitals’ closet. April 13th reports were full of quotes from Mike Babcock repeating the fact that it is more difficult to be in 1st place than it is to be in 8th. This deflecting of pressure was emulated in the headline “First pace can be worst place in playoffs.” This was likely done to reassure Leafs fans that they would not be swept in a short four game series.

Following the Leafs back-to-back wins, the pressure on Washington the Star had created, was framed as coming from within Washington itself; the mismatch between the powerful first seed and the young eighth seed was purely psychological. Writers went as far as placing the pressure of the series entirely on the shoulders of Capitals captain Alexander Ovechkin. “Ovechkin is 31 years old and running out of time” (April 18, Feschuk, S1). Apart from the disturbing fact that Ovechkin is written about as if he were a product with a limited shelf life and expiration date, he is not a player in the declining years of his career.

As the Leafs moved closer to elimination, the Star made one last effort to place all the pressure on Washington, “believing that if Toronto put pressure on a franchise with a history of failure it would come to bear” (Arthur, April 20, A1). On April 23rd, the Capitals previous shortcomings were used as a framing device to reassure Leafs fans that the series was far from over. “It’s no secret,” wrote Feschuk, “that the Washington Capitals have a history of competitive hiccups in situations of this nature… When it comes to the NHL post-season, the Capitals are the Eastern Conference’s Masters Of Missed Chances, its Butchers of Big Moments, its Elite Ignorers of Opportunity’s
Copious Knocks” (S2). Deflecting pressure on Washington was all for naught, as the Maple Leafs collapsed under the weight of a sold out Sunday crowd at the ACC.

With the Star placing playoff pressure squarely on the shoulders of Toronto’s opponent, the paper was successfully able to background all of the expectations that Leafs fans had for the post-season: “This is likely the last year this Leafs team gets the luxury of playing without real expectations, with no scars, with nothing but road in front of them, and a horizon” (Arthur, April 22, S1/S2). Further to background the desires of Leafs fans, Feschuk echoed a similar sentiment on the same day: “the mood has been light around Leafland all series long” (Feschuk, April 22, S2). Describing the mood around this series as “light” is laughable, and also contradicts everything that had been written up to this point about booming bar business and fans having a “reason to believe.” It contradicted the Maple Leafs presence on several of the Star’s front pages.

Victory in Defeat

The theme of the Maple Leafs winning tradition was established by framing defeat as a victory unto itself. Despite only winning two of the six games in the series, with the right spin, every loss is a win. April 14th (first day of official post game coverage) began with a front page headline of “Chin up Toronto: this is a series.” Immediately authors took to reassuring Maple Leafs fans and Star readers that it was not as bad as they thought. The mere fact that Toronto was able to keep up with Washington and could make it through 60 minutes of regulation game play was a victory in and of itself. McGran wrote on April 15th, “the Leafs took the top seed to overtime, proving to themselves and everyone else that they belong in the playoffs” (S2).
In games Toronto lost, they still “did all sorts of good things” (Arthur, April 15, S1), a trend that backgrounded errors. Title examples that illustrate this are “Down, but just barely”, and “Leafs kids were alright in playoff baptism.” The expectations for the young team were never explicitly stated, other than the unspoken hope that Toronto would not be swept in a four game series. Through this frame, the Maple Leafs could do no wrong, and even following Game Four, their loss was softened as “a loss but not quite with the reek of losing. They’re still passing the sniff test these Leafs” (DiManno, April 20, S2). By the final days of the sample, the entire playoff appearance itself was framed as a victory for the franchise. This supports the theme of a winning tradition because the Star, like myth itself, is able to “deprive the object of which it speaks all its history” (Barthes, 1972, p. 151). In this case, removing a 50-year history of poor performance, is beneficial to the Maple Leafs brand.

Be-Leaf

Not all hockey myth present in the sample was specifically Maple Leafs related. The Star used broader Canadian cultural myths about hockey as well. The strongest of these larger myths was the childhood love of the game, reminiscent of the tones in Roch Carrier’s The Hockey Sweater. These broader myths created a theme that attempted to inspire and sustain a belief in the Maple Leafs. More specifically, a belief in their ability to win both the series and the Stanley Cup, as well as belief that the team was simply worth believing in.

2 The Hockey Sweater is a short story and the most well-known and iconic work by Carrier. The story is about a young French Canadian boy who is ostracized by his hockey team for wearing a Maple Leafs sweater that was incorrectly sent to him by Eaton’s department store.
A significant amount of the Star’s attention was paid to Tom Wilson, a Toronto native playing for the Capitals. The Star focused intently on Wilson’s childhood and his love of the Maple Leafs, without addressing his skills or performance during any of his professional career. A total of four stories were written about Wilson, each romanticizing older myths of Maple Leafs tradition. Dougherty of The Washington Post wrote, “Wilson can still remember those perfect Saturdays playing ball hockey on his family’s rink in the backyard. When the daylight seemed to last an hour or two longer than it should have. When sunset meant the Maple Leafs were starting on the television inside” (April 14, S3). The language in these articles created a new thread of myth whereby even the enemies of the Maple Leafs adore them. Later in the sample, Wilson would reappear, only this time “haunting” his childhood team after scoring two goals in Game Five. The idea of “haunting” supports Barthes’ and Zuurbier’s idea that larger than life myths follow players around.

In a story published about Lanny McDonald’s induction into the Hockey Hall of Fame, the Star used “golden age” nostalgic myths when speaking of McDonald playing in Toronto, writing about when “he left his small town in Alberta to play for the Maple Leafs in 1973.” The quote mythologizes the transition from small town to large city, as if that great dream that all Canadian children dream, still exists to this day. Perhaps it does, but they do not all dream of winning in Toronto, nor should they. This story was also “tailored” to specifically fit into the Maple Leafs narrative. While McDonald did play for the Leafs in the 1970s, he is much better remembered as a Calgary Flame. It was in Calgary that McDonald spent the majority of his career, and was part of the Flames’ only franchise Stanley Cup victory, and where his number 9 jersey is one of only two retired
numbers. Even the inset photograph in the article featured Lanny in front of a blue and white Toronto Maple Leafs backdrop. This Maple Leafs bias supports the theme of winning tradition by reinforcing the legacy of great players who, however briefly, played in Toronto.

Religious Myths

There was a strong presence of religious myth in the sample, at the words and phrases level. Andy Mastoris, one of the “Grand Leaf ushers” quoted in Rush, described that, “going to Maple Leaf Gardens was like a Catholic going to the Vatican. It was a place of worship” (April 13, GT5). Myth and topicalization have been paired together due to the fact that myth was often foregrounded in topic sentences. On April 15th, Feschuk began his recap with “It was hockey’s version of a sacrifice at the playoff alter.” The sacrifice to which he was referring was a Leafs’ defenseman blocking a slap shot with his shin pad. The play did not result in any severe injury, but that act itself was mythologized. On April 21st, DiManno took much of the opening space in her article to devote to the look of Mitch Marner behind the bench prior to Game Five: “Eyes shut, forehead resting against the edge of his stick, swaying gently side-to-side, that hockey rhythm thing. He might almost have been praying” (S3). Religious mythology was even present in titles, such as “Leafs kid’s were alright in playoff baptism.” Mythical messages such as these serve to promote and reinforce hockey within the Canadian cultural consciousness by placing the game at an almost theological level.

Be-Leaf in the Fairy-tale

“When nothing is certain, everything is foreseeable – even the Maple Leafs moving on to the second round” (Feschuk, S3, April 13). A fairy-tale frame was established and shifted
from day-to-day, depending on game results, alternating between a magical “Cinderella story” frame to a “David and Goliath” victory, all the while including a rallying demand for belief in the team. It persisted through to the last day of the sample as McGran began his April 24th summary with the line, “the Maple Leafs’ dream season is over” (S2).

The series between the first seed and the eighth seed was expressed as an impossible dream, but when the series was tied at 1-1, for Leafs fans the dream was momentarily believable. Title examples that contributed to the fairy-tale frame were “Andersen writing his own fairy tale” and “A reason to believe.” Language played a large role in this frame, with the Leafs being referred to as “musketeers”, “once-upon-a-time Leafs” (DiManno, S3, April 19), and playing in a “storybook comeback.” The “Young Guys vs. Big Guys” theme would re-emerge in retellings of games that sounded like David and Goliath style fables. Arthur’s lead up to Game Two, was a whimsical retelling of how the young Leafs were able to overcome the Capitals in Game One after realizing they were not a “gang of 10-foot tall super men” (S1, April 15).

Authors sustained this theme throughout the sample with titles like “Worth the wait” and headlines like “In blink of an eye, Leafs lead series.” Prior to Game Six, the rally for belief in the playoff team took its place on the front page of the sports section as Arthur wrote, “Lord, if you’re a Leafs fan and have waited through the doomed drudgery of the years, this team has been worth waiting for… Maybe it’s worth believing in” (April 23, S1/S2). This last-ditch effort to inspire a fandom was smashed that very evening, after the Leafs final loss of the series. DiManno mocked the Leafs player’s belief in themselves as a team, as if the Star knew all along it was foolish hope. She wrote that, “Mitch Marner had stated, earlier in the day: “From the start we said, ‘Why
not us?’ Oh, the preciousness of youth” (April 24, S2). For a team of writers that pushed hard for belief, they too were naïve, not just the rookie forwards. The language is contradictory to almost everything the Star had written through the series.

**Rags-to-Riches**

The theme of belief was fostered by the presentation of the playoff bound Maple Leafs as a rags-to-riches success story. Mike Babcock’s coaching was never directly criticised in any capacity even when his words bordered on irresponsible. Rather, Babcock was repeatedly praised for the fact that he brought the team from last place to 8th place in a single season (the Leafs finished 30th in a league of 30 at the end of the 2015/2016 season). Softer news stories, which focused on individual personalities, framed many of the player’s seasons as seasons of improvement. Some rags-to-riches titles include “Leafs make something out of nothing” and “Leafs uncover share of gems.”

Their success during the regular season translated into this theme as well, with the Leafs penned as “deserving” not only of their playoff spot, but deserving to have a seven game series, as Arthur articulates: “It would be a shame if this ends short of seven games” (April 23, S1). Realistically, in professional sports nothing, with the exception of suspensions, is deserved; teams have to put the work in. With the Maple Leafs making the playoffs for the first time in four years, the Star would consistently rave about the Leafs’ privilege. The rags-to-riches success frame is both ironic and problematic as the financial advantage the Leafs have over the Capitals is enormous. With the additional MLSE/Scotiabank deal signed in August 2017, if anything, the Maple Leafs went from billion dollar rags to 1.9 billion dollar riches.
Inherent Violence

The most disturbing theme that emerged in the Star sample was the theme of inherent violence in the sport of hockey. Injuries were heavily foregrounded, in both editorial content and through the placement of visuals. Five times, a hockey player was photographed lying on the ice, with two of these occurring on the front page of the sports section (Figure 3.3). In four other instances, players from both teams were photographed in violent collisions (Figure 3.4). By publishing these images, the Star constructs violent representations of hockey. Of the thousands of images taken by various professional photographers at the games, injuries were selected as the representative frozen moment out of 60 minutes (or more) of gameplay. Even in instances when injuries were too graphic to be photographed, such as Morgan Reilly’s split lip (April 20), they were written about in explicit and vivid detail. In this example as well, Reilly’s injury was foregrounded in the opening sentence on the front page of the sports section: “First a mouthful of blood. Then a mouthful of bile. Viscous and dripping, from Morgan Reilly’s nose to his chin, spattering in crimson droplets over the ice” (Dimanno, April 20, S2).

In instance of Leaf’s defenseman Nikita Zaitsev, who was injured in a game on April 8th, his injury was written about early in the sample when his return to the Maple Leaf’s line-up was still possible. As it became more apparent that his recovery time would exceed the limits of the series against Washington, the Star ceased reporting on him. The injury was important, but the recovery less so. The foregrounding of injuries contributed to the strong presence of violent hockey mythology.
The Seriousness of Head Trauma

The most disturbing trend in backgrounding information came regarding head injuries, beginning on April 9th when Leaf’s defenseman Nikita Zaitsev left the ice with a concussion. He was a prominent scorer through the regular season. Mike Babcock desperately wanted Zaitsev to get back to practice despite doctors not clearing him for play. On several occasions through the sample, Mike Babcock was directly quoted, exposing what little regard he has for player safety when it comes to head trauma. On April 15th, Feschuk made note of Babcock’s typical insensitivity to the seriousness of brain trauma, but brushed it aside, even defended Babcock’s stance because Zaitsev is that good a player:

‘I was lobbying the best I could today, but they don’t much care what I say,’ Babcock said, speaking of the Leafs medical staff and Zaitsev. That says a couple of things about Babcock. One, as much as he jokes about how the medical staff doesn’t much care what he says, he also continues to say it- applying a not-so-subtle pressure on players to return to play from head injuries. (S3)

Babcock clashed again with medical staff over Zaitsev the following day. “Zaitsev, out with a suspected concussion, skated on his own this before the morning skate, but did not play. ‘I saw him out there, I got very excited, they shut me down very fast,’ said Babcock” (McGran, April 16, S2).

The topic of brain injuries and head trauma has been a huge issue in all of professional sports and has lead to a surge in research on concussions. A coach’s role is to look out for the well being of their players, so for the one who is the highest paid to be so negligent is both disturbing and problematic. On April 20th, an article ran in the sports
section about new inductees into the sports hall of fame, which included a doctor who was being honoured for his research on the affects of head injuries. This article conflicted with the quotes from Babcock the Star published.

Injured players struggled with a lack of agency in the sample. In several instances, articles about specific recovering players, contained no quotes from them, but included quotes about them. Nikita Zaitsev was not quoted in stories about his concussion, and Roman Polak was not quoted in an article about his season-ending ankle injury although the player that hit him was quoted in it more than once. In these cases the Star failed its principles of “accuracy, truth, and impartiality” (Statement of Principles, 2017). It also failed to foster a democratic society by failing to present information on a growing health crisis in professional sport. In these instances, rather than being impartial, the Toronto Star was on the side of MLSE.

Violent Myths

Due to the fact that injuries were foregrounded, existing myths about hockey violence were reinforced. As Barthes (1972) states, myth is about language; it is not what you communicate but how you communicate it. Imagery and language were the devices of conveying violent myths. For example: “If we were still treating this as a classroom – a bloody, sweaty, fight-to-live-every-second classroom – then the Toronto Maple Leafs are learning lessons about themselves, and about the Washington Capitals, too” (Arthur, April 18, A1). That quote, was the opening line on the front page of the Star. Images played a part in this as well. For every player that was photographed laying on the ice, that is how they are immortalized. In 60 minutes of play (or more as there were five
overtime games) that is the moment the Star chose to remember. It burns violence into the minds of readers as “just a part of the game.”

This is intensely problematic because as discussed, there is a huge amount of research and debate going on right now in all professional sports about the fallout of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). CTE is the official name given for neurological damage caused by repeated brain injuries (Maese, 2017). When violence is argued to be “just part of the game” it creates a circular argument that hinders progress on the subject, much like the denial of climate change. It is hard to change minds when images and myths about violence in hockey are so pervasive.

The theme of inherent violence in the sport of hockey raises questions about our collective identity, as nationalism is rooted in the imagined community (Anderson, 1983). As Canadians we often define ourselves by what we are not: American. We are perceived, perhaps stereotypically, as polite and passive by comparison. But if violence is this pervasive and this engrained in our national sport, perhaps we are not as pleasant as we perceive ourselves to be.

**Depoliticized Power**

The final prominent theme in the sample was one of depoliticized power. This theme worked to “purify” billion dollar corporate concerns, while the amount of coverage as a whole, benefitted those concerns. As Barthes (1972) insists, “myth does not deny things, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification” (p. 143). Indeed the Star worked to normalize and naturalize corporate interests throughout the sample.
When it came to agent-patient relations, players were rarely given a voice in articles for which they were the prime topic. The resounding voice of authority through the entire sample the Maple Leaf’s head coach Mike Babcock. He was quoted in 30 of 59 articles and was often quoted more than once in each. This gave him a tremendous amount of agency. Babcock’s habit of disregarding head injuries gave him a position of power, and his words discredit the risk of brain injuries to players in any sport. Washington Capital’s head coach Barry Trotz was the most frequently quoted opponent in the sample as well.

Hockey fans were also given very little space for their opinions. Authors wrote about the “light moods around Leafland,” but they never provided evidence, quotes, or even tweets to support that claim. Staff writers also wrote about restaurants and bars having a surge of business during playoffs but again they quoted owners and managers, not fans and patrons. In the one article where the Star did actually get out on the street to speak to fans, they did not ask the right questions. They asked fans “who will win?” but never “how much did your tickets cost?” if fans were even able to afford them. Both of these trends in sourcing reveal that those with the most agency, are those with the most money. Agency was used once again to background the billion dollar costs of professional hockey.

A soft news article from April 14th lightly described that Wayne Gretzky was enjoying the 2017 playoffs. Based on a mere text message he sent to the Canadian Press, the “article” explained that Number 99 was enjoying the buzz circulating around Auston Matthews (TOR) and Connor McDavid (EDM). It did directly mention Auston Matthews, but did not address any specific plays or games that Gretzky found particularly
enthralling; just that he “enjoyed the hype.” Such an unfocused, broad and general piece, only serves the purpose of keeping Gretzky’s own brand alive, and keeping him relevant by maintaining his status as a figure in Canadian cultural lore. Even further, the backgrounded business reality is that Gretzky owns a large share of the Oilers organization. With his money tied up in the future of the Oilers, Gretzky could likely care less about the post-season success of the Maple Leafs.

The Business Of Hockey
The corporate side of hockey was present in the sample, but it lingered in the shadows, distorted as “neither a lie nor a confession” (Barthes, 1972, p. 129). On April 13th Arthur wrote a piece about Mike Babcock being the highest paid coach in the NHL, but his exact salary was never mentioned. Later, in a Feschuk piece from April 24th, once the series was over, Babcock’s $50 million contract was openly discussed. The finances of professional hockey were often alluded too but never discussed in detail, as if the Star would like readers to forget that Toronto is a billion dollar hockey market, and to believe the Maple Leafs are worth the steep ticket price, without explaining why the ticket price is so high.

Tom Wilson of the Washington Capitals was also quoted as taking a “financial hit” in trying to get tickets for his family to come see him play at the ACC (April 20, Feschuk). In a piece about the young Leafs being unsung heroes, it was noted that players were stepping up and “playing above their pay grade” (McGran, April 17, S2). What is deemphasized here is the fact that even the bare minimum entry-level NHL contract is about 300,000 dollars. The lowest paid player on the Maple Leafs roster makes $612,500 each season (Capfriendly, 2017). As the cost of living in Toronto becomes increasingly
astronomical for its citizens each year, it was peculiar to see the left-leaning paper attempt to generate sympathy for the equal pay of players who are already part of the 1%.

A piece from April 21st described the Leafs playoff strategy of sticking together even off the ice. Even though the team played three games on home ice in Toronto, players and coaches stayed in hotels in the downtown core close to the ACC. The explanation offered for this is that, “billion-dollar franchises, convinced by sleep experts of the value of a good night’s rest, are willing to spend money to ensure players get one” (Feschuk, S2). The article was focused on brotherly love and the bonds of friendship that were being strengthened by the team’s close quarters, but it backgrounded that fact that the fans play a large role in footing those lavish hotel bills.

In the New York Times “Grand Ushers” story, the authors never question why these ushers hold this job well into their 70s and 80s. It is likely the only way these fans/ushers can afford to see the team. “These grand old ushers are believed to be the longest-tenured members in the NHL” (Rush, GT1). The article also quoted Brian and Margie Watkins who are also in their 70s and have been Maple Leafs season ticket holders since 1972. They now live in Cobourg Ontario, a town approximately 115 kilometres east of Toronto. What is backgrounded here is that the elderly Watkins couple are representative of the majority of Leafs season ticket holders; regardless of obstacles, they do not give them up because they are so difficult to come by. The National Post did the math in June 2016. Of the 15,500 seats in the Air Canada Centre reserved for season

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3 The 1% is a term coined by the Occupy movement in 2011 that refers to income inequality in society. The richest 1% of the population controls or owns the largest majority of wealth.
ticket holders, 99.5% renewed their seats. Only 77 season tickets seats became available in 2016, for the wait list of over 10,000 (Redman, 2016). The struggle to get a ticket, no matter the circumstance, is omitted from this story.

Sports fan’s opinions of the ticket struggle were also backgrounded heavily. In an on the street piece from April 16th, a Star staff writer interviewed Maple Leaf, Raptors, and Blue Jays fans in downtown Toronto, on a rare day on which all three major league teams were playing. The question of “why aren’t you inside the arena?” was never posed. In a business section piece about playoffs boosting bar revenue, it was said that a boom was expected with the Leafs in the playoffs. However, bars do better business when the Raptors are on. Three different bar managers were interviewed and quoted but never their patrons.

Turning to the media side of hockey business, on April 19th DiManno noted how “every promising Maple Leaf of the past has come to grief in Toronto,” without acknowledging the role the media play in that. Phil Kessel and Dion Phaneuf, both former big contract players, were practically chased out of Toronto for under performing. It is also widely regarded that Toronto is the toughest city to play because of the pressure from the media. As Michael Traikos (2017) of the National Post argues:

Toronto may or may not be the best hockey market in the world, but it’s certainly the biggest. There’s strength in numbers, with more reporters covering the sport here than in any other place in the NHL. Because of that, the daily plight of the team’s seventh defenseman often receives more attention that star forwards in some other markets.
CHAPTER FOUR

I love the team; I’m just not crazy about the culture that surrounds them. And I find the popular suggestion by Leafs fans that ‘hockey is Toronto’s game’ increasingly hollow and a little snobbish (Teitel, April 15, A11).

Impressions

The impressions created through this sample reveal that the Toronto Star’s reporting heavily favoured the Maple Leafs. This analysis has seen that rather than devices such as framing and foregrounding operating independently of each other, they are each altered in conjunction with one another to build towards a unified image of the Maple Leafs as a winning franchise and create a strong imagined community. The trends indicate genre has been used to increase the volume of Leafs content in the sports section, based on the fact that only about 25% of all articles written on the Leafs were examples of genuine journalistic reporting. Backgrounding, omission, and sourcing reveal a bias favouring the institution of MLSE. By printing quotes from coaches that expose an unabashed disregard for player’s safety, rather than quoting the players themselves, the Star is siding with those in a position of power. The Star put mythology first and reintroduced old Maple Leafs lore to a new audience, while pulling existing Leafs fans further into the media ghetto by making those old myths prominent again.

The theme of the Maple Leafs’ winning tradition works to justify some of the highest ticket prices in professional hockey in North America. Again myth has been used to distort Maple Leafs’ history, as the franchise had a winning record but has not renewed this title in 50 years. The theme of “Be-Leaf” works to mystify the corporate presence within the institution of professional hockey. The fairy-tale frames make the game benign and innocent, and recall a golden age of hockey before helmets and multi-million dollar
contracts. Themes of violence and perspectives that favour the agents in power, normalize the danger in the sport and serve to discredit a growing body of scientific research on brain injuries. The publication states its responsibility to maintaining an informed public, which is “essential to fostering and preserving Canada’s democratic society” (Statement of Principles, 2017). With the information the Star did and did not present, the paper failed in their responsibility to inform that society.

As explained in Chapter Three, the Toronto Raptors received only about half the number of editorial pieces than the Leafs did during their playoffs. Raptors reports were resigned to the back half of the sports section despite the team’s history of consistent playoff success. The Raptors fan base looks much different than that of the Maple Leafs; it is both inclusive (financially) and alive. In Teitel’s April 15th report on sports culture in Toronto, she wrote of Raptors games, “the stands are young, diverse and ecstatic throughout. They aren’t stacked with serious guys in suits, nor are they temporarily empty as they often are at Leafs games” (A11). Since the Raptors entered the NBA in the 1990s, Toronto cannot label itself as just a hockey city, nor should it. It should wear its diversity as a badge of pride, because diversity is “more Canadian” than hockey, is it not? Yet the prevalence of Leafs mythology paints a portrait of a team and franchise characterized by an unapologetic haughtiness that spreads to its fans. Teitel again observed of Leafs fan culture, a bold sense of entitlement and “the tenacity to walk into a bar called Hoops and wonder aloud why everyone is watching basketball” (A11). And Leafs culture is ever more exclusionary. The mere fact that the Toronto Star barely addressed these problems is evidence of that. Thousands of fans standing outside to watch the game, season ticket holders that do not even reside in the Greater Toronto
Area, and seats that are vacant night after night because they belong to a corporation, not a person.

Overall, the Star did precisely what Serazio (2012) theorized; they purveyed myth by replicating and recycling themes through the sample: “The repetition of themes in sportswriters’ narration follows a fairly consistent script – indeed, almost like that of a Catholic mass – just as the players and fans themselves follow certain predictable routines and voice certain prescribed commentary” (p. 315).

**Sport Media Complex and the Toronto Star**

To reiterate, Lefever (2012) explains that the sport media complex examines the relationship between sports organizations (clubs, leagues, athletes), media organizations (television, newspapers, radio) and commercial organizations (advertisers, sponsors), and sports fans (Figure 1.3). In the traditional, or analogue model, sports organizations provide the media with content, in exchange for exposure that results in revenue for the sports team. With a readership or viewership seeking sports content, media organizations are attractive for commercial organizations that purchase advertising space from the media. Those same advertisers sponsor teams in order to give their brands exposure during games. In the center of this three way flow of content and revenue are the fans, who are exposed to the content, advertising and media coverage, with very little influence.

The Star’s role in the sport media complex, based on the 2017 playoff analysis is predominantly for team exposure. The paper is owned and operated by Torstar group, which is independent of both Bell Media and Rogers Communications. The Maple Leafs supply the Star with large amounts content, which keeps the paper relevant and solidifies
their role as a key source in the larger Leafs conversation (Figure 4.1). The Star pushed this role to the extreme, as evidenced by the number of soft editorials published in the sample. Even when content was unrelated to the team or the playoffs, the Star tailored the stories to fit into their sports section and into their Leaf playoff narrative. The desire to remain culturally relevant and “in the loop” is why the Star contributes to the sport media complex.

Not only does the Star play a role in the sport media complex, it is also an active contributor to Zuurbier’s (2016) idea of a “media ghetto.” The exposure the Star generates for the Maple Leafs, grows the media ghetto, “as its media content beckons new fans to enter the fray” (p. 257). This territory is characterized by “little to no exposure to the world outside that discursive space” (p. 256). Indeed, throughout the sample, the Maple Leafs shared the front page with French politicians, the Premier of Ontario, and car bombs in Syria (Figure 3.2). Yet on these days, the Maple Leafs headlines seemed to shout loudest over all of these other voices, again bringing into question the Star’s principle of an “emphasis on politics.” The media ghetto spills over onto the front page in Toronto.

The unanswerable question remains: why? If the Toronto Star promotes the Maple Leafs for the purpose of exposing the brand, why not promote both of MLSE’s teams equally? Why choose the Maple Leafs, the team with less success, and relegate the Raptors, who have a young, diverse, and thriving fan base, to the back half of the sports section?
Maple Leafs Brand Public

As I addressed in Chapter One, dimensions of both brand communities and brand publics can coexists, with one potentially being more pronounced than the other in certain instances (Arvidsson, 2016). The Maple Leafs fandom is just such a case. The brand community of the Maple Leafs is made up of the older generation of fans born prior to 1967 (their last Stanley cup win). These members formed social bonds around the team and brand based on the collective experience of winning a championship, which lead to a strong sense of common identity. These older members were alive to remember and be a part of the Leafs’ “winning tradition” and as children were raised in proximity to the familia kin totem (Serazio, 2012). One such member, James Murphy (age 56) was interviewed in Hudes’ “Fans’ Fantasy” report from Maple Leaf Square. Murphy was described as “wearing a blue and white Leafs jersey with a ‘waiting since 67’ name/number plate, said he’s been alive for three Stanley Cup victories by the Leafs and desperately wants to see a fourth” (April 16, S5).

The younger generation, including but not limited too millennials, do not have the shared meanings that the brand community has. To those born after 1967, the golden years of Stanley Cup victories are just stories. Their relationship with the brand community is much more shallow; not predicated interaction with other members, it is more likely to take the form of something much more ephemeral, like a hashtag. They are members of the brand public, not the community, and they participate for the purpose of visibility; to be seen as contributors to the conversation.

The Maple Leafs brand public, fueled by the reach of social media, has completely eclipsed the size of the Leafs’ brand community. On social media, “hashtags
enable users to initiate and sustain publics by associating their tweets with a publically searchable classification” (Arvidsson, 2016, p. 731), and users can be “seen” as a part of the large conversation. On social media, for a disconnected mass of users there is the possibility for interaction, but no obligation. The brand public populates a public online space with sporadic posts of personal opinions.

The major divide between the Maple Leafs brand community and the brand public is that what the community has in common is real. A real sense of shared values and experiences built on social interactions. The experience of community in the brand public is *virtual*. And while that virtual community might “sometimes be actualized, as when the public takes to the street and becomes a crowd, this need not necessarily happen for the experience to ‘work’, nor do such ‘actualizations’ need to endure. The public might as well evaporate once the common affective intensity that keeps it together can no longer be sustained” (Arvidsson, 2013, p. 377). Maple Leaf Square, located just outside of the Air Canada Centre, is exactly such an actualization of the brand public (Figure 4.2). This brief assembly of fans is free and open to all, so it draws enormous numbers, as the square has a capacity of roughly 3,000 (Fautuex, 2013). When the game is over, they disperse. The assembly of the brand public confers the ‘experience’ of community and the experience of either winning together or losing together. Maple Leaf Square is the best example of the Maple Leafs brand public co-existing with the brand community. While the Leafs’ brand community, the older, wealthier fans, are inside watching the game, the more transient members of the brand public linger outside, drawn in by the lure of visibility and authenticity but kept out by the cost of participation.
The *Toronto Star* is not the sole factor in the establishment of the Maple Leafs brand public, but it does contribute to its large membership. The brand public “endures as long as this mechanism of mediation operates: when the newspaper ceases publishing, its public dissolves” (Arvidsson, 2016, p. 730). *Toronto Star* news coverage reaches the largest newspaper readership in Canada, and when they stopped their playoff coverage, the public did indeed dissolve. But is that not normal because the team’s hockey season was over? To a certain extent yes, but the proof of the transient brand public is in the numbers of fans who returned in October 2017, at the start of the new season. Metrics were collected based on Google Trend results searching “Toronto Maple Leafs.” Between April 16th and 22nd, 2017, numbers peaked at 100 (Figure 4.3). The peak at the start of the new 2017/2018 season was 37, reached during the first week (October 8th – 14th, 2017) (Figure 4.4).

**Issues with the Brand Public**

The Maple Leafs brand public adds “publicity value” to the brand (Arvidsson, 2013), with the “buzz” generated from the team. The value generated by brand publics is not rational and is not “supported by established traditions” (p. 376). Rather this type of value is supported by a shared public perception, so when the team is winning, the brand public is winning (and growing).

However hollow this value may be, it does result in a tangible increase in costs. Following the Maple Leafs playoff run, the naming rights to the Air Canada Centre were purchased by Scotiabank. The deal, which closed August 6, 2017 (Robertson, Bradshaw, & Gray, 2017), is valued at $800 million, making it one of the “richest deals in professional sports” (Campbell, 2017b). Scotiabank will pay MLSE $40 million per
season; ten times what Air Canada was paying. In just shy of twenty years the value of
the venue went from $40 million to $800 million. To Scotiabank’s chief marketing
officer, “Toronto’s a hugely important market to us… those factors deserve a bit of a
premium price” (Campbell, 2017b).

Competition for the naming rights was a major factor in driving up the cost of the
naming rights. Reportedly eight companies, including Air Canada were interested in the
rights along with the Bank of Montreal (BMO), and the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC).
Scotiabank, which already owns the Calgary Saddledome (home of the Calgary Flames),
has branded itself as ‘Canada’s hockey bank,’ “in an effort to tap into the deep emotional
bond many Canadians have with the sport” (Robertson et al., 2017). With a price tag well
over half a billion dollars, national banks are really the only companies that would ever
be able to afford this. What the Scotiabank deal means is that Canadian hockey fans are
now caught between the major banks and major telecommunications providers in the
cultural monopolization of professional hockey.

In Scotiabank’s estimation, they are paying “a premium price for a premium
product” (Evans, 2017). But what exactly does that mean, if publicity value is a matter of
public perception? According to Arvidsson (2013), differing interpretations of value can
be a justification for large price difference among functionally similar goods. Regardless
of whether the “product” Scotiabank is referring to in the above quote is the physical
building or the Maple Leafs team itself, MLSE is the iPhone of the NHL. Leafs fans,
much like Apple users, “somehow feel that their favoured brand is superior to others, in a
moral sense, without them being able, perhaps, to explain exactly how” (Arvidsson,
2013, p. 379).
This $800 million dollar deal will in all likelihood propel MLSE into a higher position on the Forbes list of most valuable franchises, moving the Maple Leafs from second place, behind the New York Rangers, into first. Record setting deals like this one are problematic, as they cause the gap between rich and poor clubs to widen at an accelerated rate (Ammirante, 2009).

The other main issue with the Maple Leaf’s brand public is that it is so incredibly large, that it cannot adequately support its own weight. There is no better example of this than the Maple Leafs season ticket wait-list. In the summer of 2016, *The National Post* concluded that those on the wait-list will be waiting well past their life expectancy.

Toronto’s Air Canada Centre has 18,900 seats available for Leafs games, and 15,500 of them belong to season ticket holders. In March, 99.5 per cent of those tickets were renewed — meaning just 77 season tickets became available for sale to the 10,000 people currently on the wait list. At that rate, and assuming each person wants at least two tickets, it will take more than 250 years to clear the existing list. (Redman, 2016)

**Dart Guy**

As the brand public extends onto the social and digital media landscape, fans are also proving to be a source of exposure for sports teams as well, via the publication and share-ability of user generated content (Lefever, 2012). The fan now known as “Dart Guy,” represents the intersection of many different aspects of branding theories. There is no example more perfect to illustrate Serazio’s idea of totemic worship. Although the *Star* did not write any specific articles on Dart Guy, his photograph was published in the front section on April 15th (Figure 1.1). He caused a tremendous stir on social media as
thousands of users adopted his photo for their own display and profile photos, endorsing his likeness as the epitome of Maple Leafs fandom (Kwong, 2017). By printing pictures of Dart Guy, the Star was part of the bubbling conversation taking place within the mediated brand public.

Described as an NHL icon, “Toronto’s hero” (Benjamin, 2017), and a “beacon of hope for Leafs fans” (Slaughter, 2017), Jason Maskalow is a Waterloo, Ontario resident who drove approximately 800 km to the Verizon Centre in Washington to watch the Leafs play the Capitals in Game Two. As Serazio (2012) notes “the more you bought and decorated your body with the totem, the closer you moved to some sacred center and the more a part of the group you displayed yourself to be” (p. 309), and there was no one in Washington closer to the Maple Leafs totem than Maskalow. He dyed his beard blue, painted his face white with a large blue maple leaf in the middle. “Go Leafs Go” was written around the back of his skull, and on top of his head, he had shaved his hair into the shape of the Stanley Cup (Figure 3.5). As the CBC’s Hockey Night In Canada camera operators panned the crowds in Washington, they landed on Maskalow at just the right moment, staring blankly at the ice, with an unlit cigarette hanging out of his mouth. In a matter of seconds, the Maple Leaf media ghetto exploded.

Social media users began adopting his photograph as their own, with captions reading “you’re not a real Leafs fan unless you change your profile picture to this” (Pickens, 2017). Maskalow was photoshopped on to the Canadian five-dollar bill and into other famous Canadian images, and his look further spawned hundreds of memes that circulated on Twitter and Instagram, perfect for the brand public (Figure 4.6). Retweet a photo or change your picture and you become a part of the buzzing conversation around
Dart Guy; that is brand public behavior in a nutshell. The hashtag #DartGuy peaked (Figure 4.7) in conjunction with the Toronto Maple Leafs hashtag from the previous section (Figure 4.3).

On the surface, Maskalow was mythologized as representing the ideal “die-hard, blue collar” Maple Leafs fan. Internet and news reports chose to focus solely on his look. Myth removed his history and circumstance so all that remained for viewers was to “enjoy the beautiful object without wondering where it comes from” (Barthes, 1972, p. 151). What Dart Guy more accurately represents is a member of a fandom who is excluded from his own club. It was easier and more affordable for Maskalow to travel to Washington, than travel to Toronto. The only reason Maskalow was later invited to the remaining home games in Toronto, was by the grace of MLSE’s charity. They too wanted to capitalize upon his authenticity, and keep the buzz and value he brought to the brand public alive. He was presented as an everyday blue-collar fan, but really he more accurately represents Leafs fans because he had to find a creative way to try and beat down the enormous financial barrier of getting into the ACC.

Fans are always looking “to develop new, unique types of knowledge that allow for the creation of new means of distinction,” and over time they create “new rituals of fandom” (Zuurbier, 2016, p. 258). Dart Guy was indeed a new ritual of fandom, but is his behaviour the solution to the problem? Debase yourself to the point of embarrassment and hope for the infinitesimal chance that you will be noticed and become a celebrity (or a meme)? Much like the Green Men, the one thing Dart Guy had going for himself was his authenticity. But now that it has been done, it likely will not be a news story when it happens again.
Maskalow continues to attend games in his blue and white ensemble, and despite being an employee at a Toyota auto-parts plant, is now a member of The Sports Network’s (TSN) hockey podcast “The Dart Guy and Todd Shapiro Show.”

**Conclusions**

The objective of this research was to identify and examine how the *Toronto Star* contributes to Maple Leafs myths. The analysis ultimately identified four predominant threads of myth. The *Star* has attempted to live up to its progressive value of contributing to “a strong and united Canada” (Statement of Principles, 2017), however, the presence of these myths builds a brand public, rather than an imagined community. The Maple Leafs brand public that is fostered does not reflect Canada’s informed democratic society. It is shallow, transient, and driven by the power of dollars spent. The *Star* fundamentally failed to adhere to its principles.

I offer a recommendation for the *Toronto Star* going forward, and that is to cut down on the disproportionate number of soft news stories about men’s professional hockey in Toronto, and instead dedicate that space in print to the Toronto Furies. The Furies are Toronto’s CWHL team and reporting on their games in the *Star* would give the women’s league the boost it so desperately needs, as well as begin to bridge the enormous gender equality gap that exists in professional sports today. Lastly, reporting on women’s professional hockey would give the *Star* sports section the democratic focus it seems to have lost.

As the mythology of the brand public grows, larger Canadian cultural mythologies around hockey weaken and interest in the physical activity of participating wanes. “The game that originated as backyard shinny has evolved to become a bastion of
the affluent” (Riley, 2016). The mythology of the brand public begins to naturalize the commodification and corporate presence in hockey as well. This becomes problematic as “hockey’s stature as a cultural institution mystifies its role as a collection of corporate concerns that situate consumption at the foundation of rituals of hockey fandom and Canadian identity” (Zuurbier, 2016, p. 250).

The end result is that this ritual, this sport that represents us as Canadians, one of our greatest points of pride on international stages, the stereotype we cannot escape, comes to represent who we are less and less as the corporate underpinnings remain hidden while they get stronger. One example that highlights this exact issue is the NHL’s recent decision not to allow its players to compete at the 2018 Olympic winter games in Pyeongchang, South Korea. NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman’s issue is with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) over which organization will cover the cost of NHL participation (Calfas, 2017). The decision comes as a disappointment to many players and to an even greater number of viewers. In a statement from the IOC they explain that “90 per cent of its revenue [goes to] the development of sport in the world, obviously we cannot treat a national commercial league better than a not-for-profit” (Calfas, 2017).

This analysis shall formally conclude with a call for transparency in professional hockey. If we as Canadians are going to go on consuming hockey under the notion that it is an important thread in our cultural tapestry, it is time we had a say, and a place to voice our opinions. It is time for a call to de-corporatize hockey; a call to dismantle the NHL empire and build something better.
Epilogue

Purely by coincidence, the defense of this paper fell on the 100th anniversary of the NHL and the Toronto Maple Leafs, on December 19, 2017. In celebration, the Leafs played a matinee game against the Carolina Hurricanes at the ACC, sponsored by Scotiabank and titled “The Next Century Game.” Toronto mayor John Tory, declared the 19th “Toronto Maple Leafs Day” in the city (“Toronto marks 100 years,” 2017). The focus of their centennial was on the next generation of Leafs fans.

Toronto Maple Leafs’ President Brendan Shanahan had asked season ticket holders in the weeks leading up to the game, to either donate their tickets back to the MLSE Foundation for redistribution to school-age fans, or to bring a child with them to the game (McGran, 2017). This was part of an MLSE campaign to “fill the stands with the future.” Typically a milestone game like this would be played at seven o’clock in the evening, as is normal, however, with the goal of reaching as many children as possible on a “school night,” the game was scheduled for the afternoon. Shanahan also surprised a large group of children with tickets to the game during the morning’s Scotiabank Next Century party. He told his young audience that they were the next generation of Leafs fans, coaches, and players. “I really want to hear the kids, so be really loud, cheer on the team, and be proud of the team that you’re representing. I want to thank you guys, our next generation of hockey fans” (Toronto Maple Leafs, 2017).

Much like the Star exposed old Maple Leafs myths to a new audience, so too is the corporation. The sparkling promotion to “fill the stands with the future” lures a new generation of fans into the brand public, indoctrinating them with the winning tradition. To further my point about the corporate underpinnings of professional hockey remaining
hidden, the Maple Leafs in no way addressed how they would continue to foster the inclusion of their so-called “new generation.” They did not address the financial barriers they themselves have created or how their young fans would have access to participate in the future.

From where I stand, the future looks bleak. “A ticket to a Leafs game is expensive, generally out of the range of many families. As a result, it can be difficult for a team, even one as popular as the Leafs, to connect with new fans. For many, they have a TV or streaming connection to the Leafs only, and every team in the league is equally accessible” (McGran, 2017).

On the same day (December 19th), Rogers and the CBC signed a new licensing agreement for *Hockey Night In Canada*, extending coverage until 2026 (The Canadian Press, 2017). Furthering my point that Canadian hockey fans now find themselves caught up amidst major telecommunication company’s cultural monopolization of hockey, the deal signed allows the CBC to lease NHL content from Rogers to broadcast on Saturday nights, and on weeknights during the playoffs. CBC does not pay Rogers for the hockey content, however Rogers takes charge of selling the advertising during *HNIC* and they receive all the revenue from those ads. The result is the CBC gets nothing, but it maintains its cultural credibility. The deal that Rogers made with the NHL however, is worth $5.2 billion (The Canadian Press, 2017). The relationship between Rogers and the CBC is not one of give-and-take, but rather one where Rogers has all the power.
Appendix of Images

CHAPTER ONE

Figure 1.1. Dart Guy

Figure 1.2 Vancouver Canucks’ “Green Men”

The Green Men try to distract L.A. Kings player Jack Johnston during a playoff game in Vancouver (CBC, 2011)

Figure 1.3 Sports Media Complex Diagram

[Diagram showing the relationships between Sports Organizations, Media Organizations, Commercial Organizations, Fans, Content, Content & Exposure, Revenue & Exposure, Exposure, and Revenue]
## Figure 2.1 Coding Schedule

### Coding Schedule

#### Part 1

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Figure 2.2. Coding Manual

Coding Manual
Paper as a whole (Content Analysis)

1. Date

2. Stories Following
   1. Win
   2. Loss
   3. No game the previous day

3. Front Page
   1. Yes
   2. No

4. Front Page Placement
   1. Top Banner
   2. Top Banner (with photo)
   3. Center page
   4. Center page (with photo)
   5. Bottom third
   6. Bottom third (with photo)
   7. Headline only & editorial

5. Subject Pictured

6. Article size (in cm)

7. Front Section Editorial content
   1. Yes
   2. Partial (started in front section, continued in sports section)
   3. No

8. Proximity/Intertextual Relations (what else made the front page?)

9. Front Page of Sports Section
   1. Yes
   2. No
   3. Multiple Leafs headlines on front page

10. Front Page Sports Section Placement
    1. Top Banner
    2. Top Banner (with photo)
3. Center Page
4. Center page (with photo)
5. Bottom third
6. Bottom third (with photo)
7. Headline only

11. Article Size (in cm)

12. Subject Pictured

13. Adjacent stories (on front page of sports section) and placement
   1. Basketball
   2. Baseball
   3. Golf
   4. European Football
   5. Major League Soccer
   6. Other
   7. None

14. Total number of Leafs hockey editorials

15. Number of raptors editorials

16. Raptors editorial page numbers

17. Number of NHL Playoff editorials (not the Leafs)

18. Number of all other sport editorials

19. References to Leafs in other sections
   1. Yes
   2. No
   3. Advisement for “100 Years in Blue and White” (Section)

19.b) If #19 was yes

   Individual articles (Content analysis and CDA)

1. Title

2. Placement in section
   1. Same as Part 1, Question 10.
   2. Front Page, continued later in the section
   3. In the section (with photos)
   4. In the section (no photos)
3. Page number

4. Subject Pictured
   1. (if it’s the same as Part 1, Q #12)
   2. No photo

5. Author
   1. Bruce Arthur
   2. Rosie DiManno
   3. Dave Feschuk
   4. Kevin McGran
   5. Mark Zwolinski
   6. Guest Author from another section
   7. Guest Author from another publication

6. Language
   1. Formal
   2. Semi-formal (bullet points)
   3. Informal (profanity/ poetics)

7. Tone of article
   1. Positive
   2. Neutral
   3. Negative

8. Secondary Tone
   (fill in)

9. Presence of Mythology
   1. Yes
   2. No
CHAPTER THREE

Figure 3.1. Series Overview Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Toronto Maple Leafs vs. Washington Captials</th>
<th>2017 Playoff Schedule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thursday, April 13</strong></td>
<td><strong>Saturday, April 15</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto @ Washington</td>
<td>Toronto @ Washington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (OT) 3</td>
<td>4 (2OT) 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSH leads 1-0</td>
<td>Tied 1-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcaster: CBC</td>
<td>Broadcaster: CBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monday, April 17</strong></td>
<td><strong>Wednesday, April 19</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington @ Toronto</td>
<td>Washington @ Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (OT) 4</td>
<td>5 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOR leads 2-1</td>
<td>Tied 2-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcaster: CBC</td>
<td>Broadcaster: CBC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Friday, April 21**

| Toronto @ Washington                      | Washington @ Toronto  |
| 1 (OT) 2                                  | 2 (OT) 1              |
| WSH leads 3-2                             | WSH wins 4-2          |
| Broadcaster: CBC                          | Broadcaster: Sportanet|
Figure 3.2.

Toronto Star front page April 16, 2017. Headline printed in blue rather than black ink; Toronto Raptors relegated to top banner; Leafs headline shouts louder than report of Car bomb in Syria.
Figure 3.3 Alex Ovechkin lays on the ice on the front page of the Sports section
Figure 3.4 Alex Ovechkin and Nazem Kadri Collide with photo placed in the exact center of the page.
CHAPTER FOUR

Figure 4.1 The *Toronto Star*’s role in the Sport Media Complex

Figure 4.2 Crowds watch the Jumbo-tron in Maple Leaf Square
Figure 4.3 Toronto Maple Leafs April 16 – 22 metrics (2017)

Figure 4.4 Toronto Maple Leafs October 8-14 metrics (2017)
Figure 4.5 Dart Guy look (face paint and hair)
4.6 Dart Guy Meme (Shareable content for the brand public)

![Dart Guy Meme](image)

4.7 Dart Guy peaked metrics (April 16- April 22)

![Interest over time](image)
Appendix of Sample Articles

Toronto Star Maple Leafs Playoff Articles in Chronological order (Complete list)


20. McGran, K. (2017, April 16). Kapanen and fourth line produce two goals, including the double overtime winner. Toronto Star, pp. S1, S2


_Toronto Star_, p. S2.


_Toronto Star_, pp. S1, S2.


References


Jackson, S. (2018). Sport, beer advertising and corporate nationalism in Canada:

Molson’s articulation of national and masculine identity to consumer citizenship.


Toronto Maple Leafs (Producer). (2017, December 19). @brendanshanahan has a surprise for the kids at our Next Century Game presented by @scotiahockey Party [Video]. Retrieved from https://mobile.twitter.com/MapleLeafs/status/943175535206711296?s=17


Vita Auctoris

Erin Forbes was born in Toronto, Ontario in 1993. Growing up in the city’s west end, she attended high school at Etobicoke Collegiate Institute. She completed her undergraduate degree from the University of Windsor, graduating with a BA (Hons.) in Communication, Media, and Film in 2016. Continuing as a graduate student in Windsor, she is currently a candidate for a Master’s degree in Communication and Social Justice.

In her spare time, Erin works continuously to improve her skills as a mixed media artist and painter. She continues to find inspiration in the music of Gord Downie and The Tragically Hip.