



## **“To Stand, Kneel or Sit”**

**National Football League’s Crisis Communication Relating to Anthem Protests, 2016-2017**

**13 DEC 2017**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This case study will evaluate the handling by the National Football League pertaining to the national anthem protests initiated by Colin Kaepernick. Specifically, we will provide background information of the organization, a timeline of events that have occurred up to this date, responses from key stakeholders, the impact on businesses and organization reputation and finally looking ahead at the likely outcome to the NFL brand.

## 1 - Overview

In August 2016, former San Francisco (SF) 49ers quarterback in the National Football League (NFL) Colin Kaepernick joined country-wide protests by taking a stance and kneeling during the playing of the National Anthem preceding internationally televised football games. Kaepernick, 30, who ignited the NFL peaceful protests movement remains jobless as a free agent. The former San Francisco play-caller didn't participate in a single NFL game in 2017; as result Kaepernick filed a grievance complaint against NFL owners for conspiring and colluding against him (ESPN, 2017). According to his legal team, "If the NFL (as well as all professional sports leagues) is to remain a meritocracy, then principled and peaceful political protest -- which the owners themselves made great theater imitating weeks ago -- should not be punished and athletes should not be denied employment based on partisan political provocation by the Executive Branch of our government" (ESPN, 2017).

While Kaepernick may arguably have severed employment opportunities, more than 200 players in the NFL in 2017 knelt with him in solidarity (Chicago Tribune, 2017). In fact, the Sunday after Thanksgiving 2017, more than 20 players from multiple teams either sat or kneeled during the national anthem, according to USA Today. Independent of NFL players, celebrities, magazines and Hollywood producers have sided with Kaepernick's movement. *GQ Magazine* donned him on their December 2017 cover as "*The Citizen of the Year*". National Basketball Association (NBA) superstar, LeBron James of the Cleveland Cavaliers has supported Kaepernick via social media, tweeting, "he's being blackballed by the NFL". The cast of CBS's

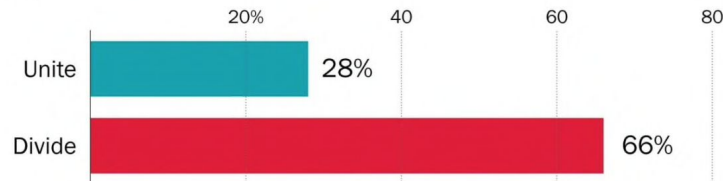
*Star Trek: Discovery* took a knee on Twitter with the hashtag #takeaknee. Musicians John Legend, Stevie Wonder and actors Alyssa Milano and Kristen Bell have also stood by him on social media.

As for the employed NFL players who opt to protests each week, the White House administration has recommended they be fired or banned from the league, which arguably validates Kaepernick's grievance complaint. When NFL running back Marshawn Lynch of the Oakland Raiders sat for America's national anthem, yet stood for Mexico's before a game, the Commander-in-chief tweeted, "Marshawn Lynch of the NFL's Oakland Raiders stands for the Mexican Anthem and sits down to "boos" for our National Anthem. Great disrespect! Next time NFL should suspend him for remainder of season. Attendance and ratings way down." (CNN, 2017). While no resolutions are on the horizon for NFL players in 2017, the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) and leadership have agreed to not modify the current policy for the remainder of the NFL season (Washington Post, 2017).

President Donald Trump has polarized the issue via numerous negative statements denouncing the protests, taking aim at players, owners, fans, supporters of the protests and others. Veteran New York Times White House reporter Peter Baker writes, "Never in modern times has an occupant of the Oval Office seemed to reject so thoroughly the nostrum that a president's duty is to bring the country together." (NYTimes.com, 2017) The fans and country are sharply divided and ratings of NFL viewership are down. (NPR.org, 2017) As a result, team owners are losing notable revenue. (WSJ.com, 2017)

**Do you think Trump has done more to unite the country, or more to divide the country?**

Post-ABC polling, Sep. 2017



(WashingtonPost.com, 2017)

Pete Vernon wrote in the Columbia Journalism Review, “By lashing out over the weekend, Trump heightened the attention paid to the protests, but he also hijacked the issue. (CJR.org, 2017) Trump’s comments, which he made at a Friday night rally in support of Alabama Senator Luther Strange and expanded upon with a series of tweets over the weekend, drew blanket coverage.” Yet, the NFL has yet to adopt a crisis communications public relations strategy that can satisfy all aforementioned stakeholders -- even 15 months later. Similarly, previous to these protests, the NFL was plagued by other contentious issues, including being criticized over the handling of Ray Rice, a former Baltimore Ravens running back, whose videotaped altercation with his then-fiancee was released to the press. (NFL.com, 2014)

These protests are likely to continue, as they are a pattern of behavior which has embedded itself into the fabric of American sports culture. In the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, two African American athletes stood with their fists raised, during the medal ceremony. In 1972, this protest reoccurred with Vince Matthews and Wayne Collett being barred from the Olympics for standing at the podium facing away from the flag during the playing of the national anthem. In

1973 at Nassau Coliseum on Long Island, fans booed and ridiculed college athletes as at least one of them overtly laid on the field during the national anthem in protest. At one point, Madison Square Garden in New York City decided not to play the national anthem before sports events, but later changed course. Then, again in 1996, Denver Nuggets player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf refused to stand and was suspended. These continual acts of defiance have no clear end in sight, and future protests should be anticipated, particularly at larger public stages, such as the Super Bowl. Increasing the likelihood of an attention-getting act, the NFL is currently being criticized by players for offering to donate money in what some consider an effort to get the players to end their protests. (NYTimes.com, 2017)

The ongoing protests triggered by Kaepernick in 2016 and escalated by President Trump's comments in 2017 plunged the NFL into an unprecedented crisis. The crisis management on behalf of the NFL has been subpar, resulting in loss of revenue, reduction in viewership, a negative perception of the handling thus far and an exasperating factor in racial tension within the United States. "This has been the NFL's most tumultuous season in recent memory and the first time in at least a generation the league's problems have seemed to overwhelm its product." (TheAtlantic.com, 2017) From the public relations management perspective, the NFL case provides important implications for crisis communication, stakeholder management, and issues management.

## **2 - Background of the organization**

### **1. History of NFL**

Rutgers University in New Jersey is dubbed the “birthplace of college football”, where on November 6, 1869, the first intercollegiate football game took place, giving the Scarlet Knights a 6 - 4 win over neighboring Princeton. Collegiate football would continue dominating the market for years, sometimes drawing crowds of as many as 100,000.



(ScarletKnights.com)

In 1925 after several local national football teams would be formed and later disbanded, Red Grange, a college star, was signed to the National Football League. Following this, popularity increased. (History.com, undated) It was in this year the NFL would admit five teams, including the New York Giants. (ThoughtCo.com, 2017)



In 1939 the Giants won the first Pro Bowl in Los Angeles, California. The Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio would later be dedicated in 1963. A rivalry between competing markets consisting of the National Football League and the American Football League reached a pinnacle in 1966, and the two finally merged. A year later, the Green Bay Packers would win what would later be known as Super Bowl I; the Super bowl being the highest honor bestowed to the winningest team. (ProFootballHOF.com, n.d.) Today, that honor continues with the issuance of the Lombardi Trophy, named after Vince Lombardi; the coach of Super Bowl I's winning Green Bay Packers team. (SBNation.com, 2017)



(RobRiveraPhotography.com)

## **2. History of the NFL Commissioner**

Roger Goodell has been the Commissioner of the NFL since 2006. To date, the commissioner has faced numerous large scale incidents, including allegations of cheating by the New England Patriots on two occasions, what some perceive as the minor punishment of Ravens running back Ray Rice, accused of punching his girlfriend in the face rendering her unconscious, allegations of domestic violence among numerous players including Ezekiel Elliot, and finally the current Kaepernick-inspired protests. (TheShadowLeague.com, 2017) On December 6, 2017, amid efforts by Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones to stifle an extension of Goodell's contract, Goodell was offered, and accepted, a five-year \$200 million contract. (NYTimes.com, 2017)



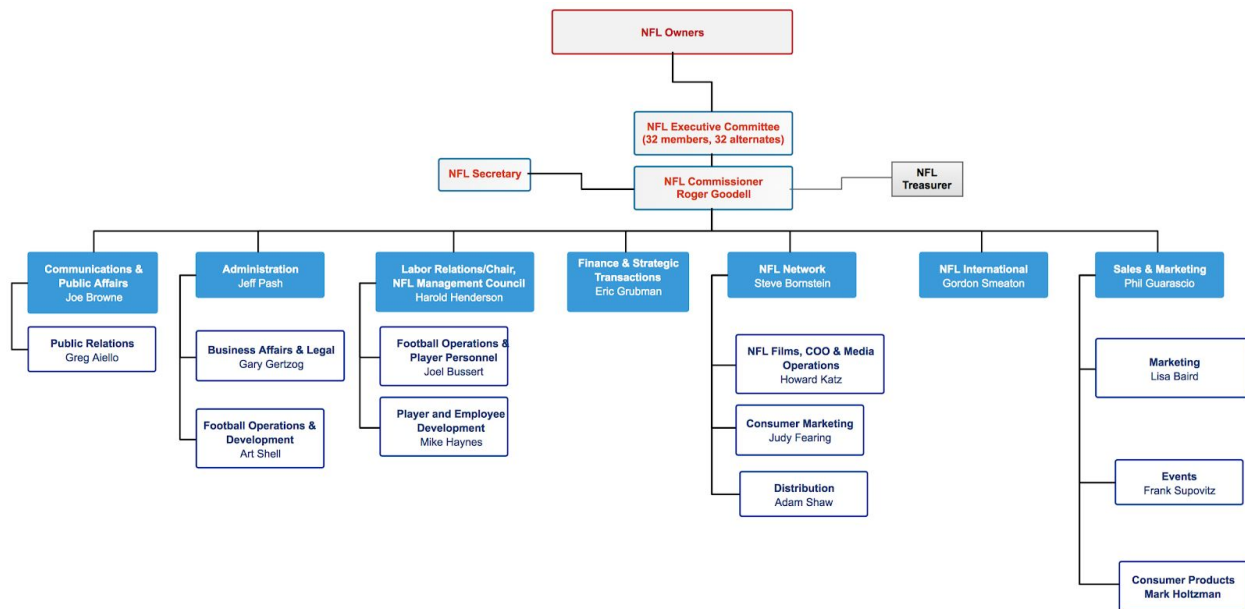
(BleacherReport.com, 2014)

## **3. NFL corporate structure and governance**

“The Executive Committee includes one representative — an owner or top officer — from each of the league’s 32 clubs. Any change in game rules, league policy or club ownership or

other modification to the game must be approved by at least three-fourths of the committee.

Without consensus, nothing will pass. As the league's chief executive, the commissioner has a great deal of influence. But he still must answer to the owners, who by executive committee vote have the power to remove him.” (Operations.NFL.com, undated)



(Creately.com)

### **3 - TIMELINE**

**August 14, 2016.** During an NFL preseason football game against the Houston Texans, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who was on injured reserve status following an injury sustained the previous season, remained seated during the playing of the national anthem.

**August 27, 2016.** After the media recognized this repeated pattern of behavior, Kaepernick came out stating, “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color.” President Donald Trump weighed in two days later calling it, “a terrible thing.”

**September 5, 2016.** President Barack Obama said he’d rather young people were engaged than, “sitting on the sidelines”.

**September 7, 2016.** NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell says, “Well my personal thoughts are... I support our players when they want to see change in society, and we don’t live in a perfect society. We live in an imperfect society. On the other hand, we believe very strongly in patriotism in the NFL. I personally believe very strongly in that.”

**March 3, 2017.** Following the conclusion of the 2016 season, Kaepernick opts out of his 49ers contract insisting the team would have cut him regardless.

**August 12, 2017.** Marshawn Lynch, during his first game back post-retirement, and Michael Bennett sit for the anthem citing Charlottesville as one of the main reasons. Following this, Trump calls it, “disrespect of our heritage”, during a rally in Alabama.

**September 23, 2017.** Trump said NFL owners should fire “son of a bitch” athletes who disrespect the flag: “Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody

disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a b---- off the field right now. Out. He's fired! He's fired!'" (espn.com, 2017) Additionally, Trump withdraws an invitation to NBA player Stephen Curry after Curry turned down an invitation to visit the White House, an NBA tradition following their title success. In response to this, players engage in a massive protest, much to the dismay of fans, particularly in Oakland. In Detroit, the actual person singing the national anthem took a knee and raised his fist, and players at an overseas game at Wembley Stadium knelt and linked arms, but stood during "God Save The Queen".

**October 8, 2017.** Vice President Pence left a game after team members protested. Trump later took credit for the departure. It is later estimated that it cost taxpayers approximately \$240,000 (Kiro7.com, 2017).

**October 9, 2017.** Jemele Hill Suspended by ESPN After Response to Jerry Jones.  
(NYTimes.com, 2017)



(Twitter.com, 2017)

**October 10, 2017.** NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell sends a letter to NFL teams asking them to stand during the national anthem.

**October 30, 2017.** Texans owner Bob McNair makes a statement that includes the statement that owners couldn't have, "inmates running the prison", sparking a massive protest of over 200 NFL players, coaches and owners (Irishnews.com, 2017).

**October 15, 2017:** QB Colin Kaepernick files grievance for collusion against NFL owners. (ESPN.com, 2017)

**November 29, 2017:** "In an unprecedented move for a major professional sports league, the NFL has proposed partnering with its players to effect social justice change, though not all players are in agreement on the proposal." (ESPN.com, 2017)

**November 29, 2017:** Players Criticize N.F.L. Over Donation Proposal. (NYTimes.com, 2017)

## **4 - Responses from the key stakeholders**

### **1. Fans**

The protesting by players during the playing of the national anthem has “exposed deep racial and political divides among the NFL’s fans.” (NPR.org, 2017) On one end, the protests are supported, however, many American are siding with the president who is adamantly opposed to this conduct which he perceives as “disgusting” and ‘dishonorable’ to military veterans. In a recent study spanning from December 2016 until December 2017, 40 percent support the president regarding this topic. (NPR.org, 2017) According to another study by the Remington Research Group, 64 percent of polled Americans agree with President Trump’s stance on the National Anthem protests, while just 25 percent do not. That same study asked whether the respondents watched more or less football as a result of the protests compared to previous years, to which 51 percent stated they’ve watched less, and just 19 percent answered more. Eighty percent said they’d like sporting events to be less political, and 60 percent said the national anthem at NFL games was an inappropriate place to protest. (thenewamerica.com, 2017) The polls show the majority of Americans are opposite to the protest, so NFL teams are continuing to lose fans over their players’ protests during the anthem.

### **2. NFL executives & owners**

NFL owners are divided across the 32 teams. Their constituencies have clearly influenced the actions of these individuals, as some modifications in their behavior due to pressure have ensued. The current game operations manual indicates:

*“The National Anthem must be played prior to every NFL game, and all players must be on the sideline for the National Anthem. During the National Anthem, players on the field and bench area should stand at attention, face the flag, hold helmets in their left hand, and refrain from talking. The home team should ensure that the American flag is in good condition. It should be pointed out to players and coaches that we continue to be judged by the public in this area of respect for the flag and our country. Failure to be on the field by the start of the National Anthem may result in discipline, such as fines, suspensions, and/or the forfeiture of draft choice(s) for violations of the above, including first offenses.”*(WashingtonPost.com, 2017, “Jerry Jones Says Cowboys Players who Disrespect the Flag Won’t Play”)

However, failing to stand during the anthem is unenforceable. Further, the only enforceable action may occur if a player fails to be on the field during its play (SI.com, 2017). The protests, according to Adam Schefter of ESPN, relate to police brutality, systemic racism and other social issues, and was initiated by the San Francisco 49ers player Colin Kaepernick (BusinessInsider.com, 2017).

President Trump called on NFL owners to fire players engaging in the protest during a political rally in Alabama on Sept. 22. This triggered criticism from players, owners and fans, and led to House Speaker Paul Ryan to state, “I do really believe his heart’s in the right place... I think we should just have separate and distinct conversations. Because when you merge it into the flag and



the anthem, it's lost." Following Trump's remarks, the protest increased from a handful to over 200 players and coaches sitting, kneeling or raising their fists in defiance during the playing of the anthem on the following Sunday (PBS.org, 2017, ABCNews.go.com, 2017). Subsequent statements and tweets by Trump continued. On October 8, Vice President Pence attended an Indianapolis Colts game, where some members of the football teams knelt during the anthem. Pence then left the game, posting to Twitter, "I left today's Colts game because @POTUS and I will not dignify any event that disrespects our soldiers, our Flag, or our National Anthem." Trump later tweeted that he asked Pence to leave and was proud of him for doing so (CNN.com, 2017).

Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones has been a paramount figure amongst NFL team owners. Jones's initial reaction to the protests was in opposition, stating on October 10, 2016, "If we are disrespecting the flag, then we won't play." The response by Trump was to give a "big salute" to Jones, who he says "will BENCH players who disrespect our Flag." (NYPost.com, 2017) However, he later changed course on September 25, 2017, where he locked arms and took a knee prior to the national anthem, following numerous contentious statements by Trump. (Syracuse.com, 2017) He and the rest of the team stood and returned to their sideline and remained standing for the anthem. (WashingtonPost.com, 2017) Jones also unsuccessfully spearheaded efforts to relieve NFL commissioner Roger Goodell of his position for his handling of the protests (Deadline.com, 2017).

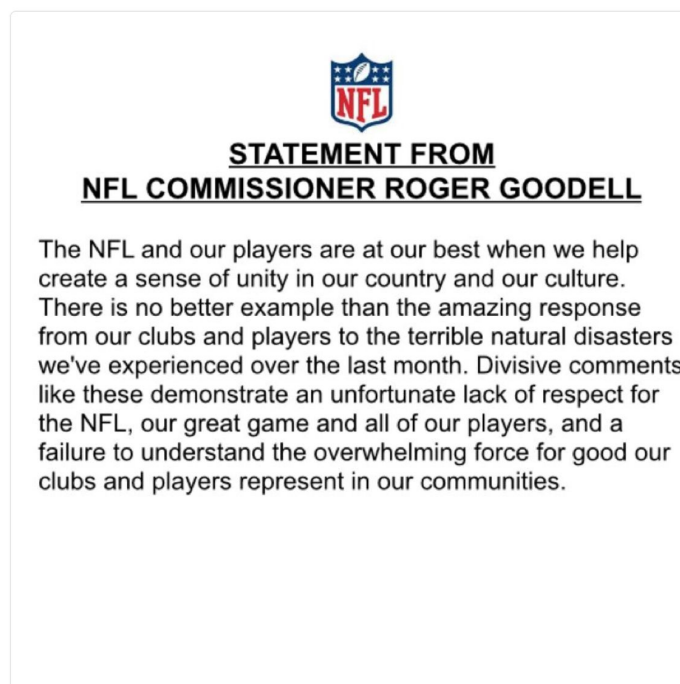
On October 28, 2017, Bob McNair, the owner of the Texas Texans, met with his team, apologizing for comments he had made during a meeting with NFL team owners. His statement that “we can’t have the inmates running the prison” was widely regarded as discriminatory in nature. As a result, a majority of the players from the Texans took a knee during the national anthem in protest against his remarks. (FoxNews.com, 2017) The former quarterback for the 49ers who initiated the protest last season became a free agent following the 2016 season. At this time, he remains unsigned and has filed a complaint that the owners of the teams are colluding against him, leaving him unemployed (ABCNews.com, 2017).



**Brian McCarthy** ✓  
@NFLprguy

Follow

### New NFL statement



9:16 AM - 23 Sep 2017

3,887 Retweets 7,836 Likes



(NPR.com, 2016)

### **3. Sponsor responses**

#### **a. Advertisers**

The majority of sponsors remained silent on the issue, likely to avoid partisanship, including Anheuser-Busch who released a statement that read in part, “We have many long-term sports partnerships, including our NFL sponsorship, and while we may not agree on everything, we still believe in the power of sport to bring people together and overcome their differences. We have no plans to end our NFL sponsorship.” However, other advertisers took clearer positions.

Companies in favor of the protests unambiguously released statements including one from Under Armour that read, “[Under Armour] stands for the flag and our Athletes [sic] for free speech, expression and a unified America.” Meanwhile, Nike sent a clear message that indicated, “Nike supports athletes and their right to freedom of expression on issues that are of great importance to our society.” (BusinessInsider.com, 2017)

In contrast, Papa John’s, a pizza delivery service, stated, “In America, we should respect those who have served AND stand up to injustice...” Papa John's, a lead sponsor for the NFL, has lowered its North American sales prediction from approximately 3% to 1.5%, blaming the failure to act by NFL leadership. Its CEO John Schnatter told Business Insider, “We are totally disappointed that the NFL and its leadership did not resolve the ongoing situation to the satisfaction of all parties long ago... This should have been nipped in the bud a year and a half ago.”(KansasCity.com, 2017) Within 24 hours of Schnatter’s controversial comments in regards to the NFL, it was reported that Papa John’s net worth fell \$70 million. Other sponsors raising

concern include Danon, FedEx, Bose, Nike, Ford, and Hyundai. (BusinessInsider.com, 2017) NBCUniversal stated, “Marketers have said, ‘We will not be part of the NFL if you continue covering” the protests. (BusinessInsider.com, 2017) Some local advertisers refused to renew their advertising contracts as well. (USAToday.com, 2017)

#### **b. Broadcasters**

Satellite-based television provider DirecTV, owned by AT&T, made the significant move of refunding subscribers of its NFL Sunday Ticket if they’re opposed to the protests.

(WashingtonPost.com, 2017) While many pay-TV services refused to discuss the matter, Cox Communications said it had not received, “very many calls.” In October, Fox Sports, who is locked into a multi-year contract, indicated it would not be airing the national anthem.

(Fortune.com, 2017)

#### **4. Social Media Reactions**

“More than four million social posts included those related to the NFL and the national anthem as well as those that used the hashtags #TakeAKnee (2.4 million mentions) or #TakeTheKnee (1.2 million). Two other hashtags, #BoycottNFL (101,500 mentions) and #MAGA (90,900) were also trending.” (AdWeek.com, 2017) According to Bandwith, #TakeAKnee has accumulated more than three billion impressions -- and #TakeTheKnee has more than 1.6 billion.

(TheDrum.com, 2017) Talkwater indicated the #BoycottNFL had 101,500 mentions and #MAGA, short for ‘make America great again’, had 90,900, as of Monday, Sept. 25, 2017, at 8 a.m. E.T.. (Variety.com, 2017)

## **5 - Impact**

### **1. Revenue**

On September 24, President Trump sent a tweet right before Sunday's games, stating, "NFL attendance and ratings are way down. Boring games, yes, but many stay away because they love our country. League should back U.S." Following on Tuesday, he echoed, "Ratings for NFL football are down, with the exception before game starts when people tune in to see whether or not our country will be disrespected!"

NFL ratings were down about 10% for the first three weeks of the season, which started Sept. 7, with approximately 15.8 million viewers, compared to 17.6 million during the first three weeks of 2016, according to Nielsen data. That follows a trend the previous year of overall viewership during the 2016 regular season when ratings fell 8%. (US Today, 2017) President Trump referred to the NFL's rating as "massively, massively down" and suggested the players kneeling down during the national anthem were turning fans away. However, some voices suggested that NFL rating decline seems like nothing compared to the rest of television. The NFL was down 5% overall from the same point last year while four major networks are down an average 8% in prime time. NBC is down 4%, CBS is down 6%, ABC is down 11%, and Fox's prime-time viewership dropped 20% through the first month of the new TV season, according to Nielsen data. Fewer U.S. homes, 79%, are getting paid-TV service, down from 84% in 2014, and that fragmentation of the viewing public as more customers cut, shave or shirk the paid-TV cord impacts viewership, too. NFL ratings do not include most streaming options. (USA Today, 2017)

## **2. Organizational Reputation**

Even though, the big data was suggesting that the drop of NFL's ratings was caused by more than one reason, there were still a large number of fans who claimed they were walking away from the NFL. Some football fans indicated online that they were planning to tune out, give up their season tickets and spend their Sundays away from the TV or the stadium. Monday Morning Quarterback (MMQB), the must-read insider football column on SI.com, received numerous emails from NFL fans who said they'd had enough of politics mixing with sports and are done watching the NFL.

ESPN has conducted research and found that television viewership of NFL games has dropped 7.5% from last season and 18.7% from 2015 through week 6. (WashingtonPost.com, 2017) NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell was reportedly under scrutiny over his handling of the situation, with owners discussing whether an extension of Goodell's contract could be halted. This effort was unsuccessfully led by Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, and included a 17-owner conference call in October. (Deadline.com, 2017)

The league has come under "increased heat from sponsors and politicians," as they seek to mandate all players to stand during the anthem. (CBSSports.com, 2017)

## **6 - Looking Forward**

The current consumer climate demands top corporations hear public opinions and take notice of consumer issues and concerns through a two-way symmetrical dialogue followed by immediate action which often translates to policy reform. As the late Arthur W. Page said, you have to 'prove it with action'. The case of the NFL peaceful protests warrant closer examination to determine what Goodell and NFL owners did right and wrong in meeting the crisis communications needs of the former most watched sport in the U.S. The exploration seeks to reveal how their current and past actions relate to the battle-tested Arthur Page Principles which include:

- Telling the truth
- Proving with Action
- Listen to the customer
- Manage for tomorrow
- Conduct public relations as if the whole company depended on it
- Realize a company's true character is expressed by its people
- Remain calm, patient and good-humored

The future of the NFL, and in fact the sport of football, will be dependent upon the actions-or inactions-of their director of communications & public affairs as well as the commissioner.

When reviewing past crises the NFL has confronted, the common denominator is a failure to act openly, honestly or in a timely manner. It can be expected that if no deviation of course occurs, ratings will continue on their current downward trend. While Page outlines the true character of a company is expressed by its people, the polarization and fragmentation of the NFL's members is reflective of its current state-disorganized and chaotic.

## Appendix 1



# Timeline of NFL Protests During the National Anthem

**August 14, 2016** - 49ers Quarterback Colin Kaepernick sits during the national anthem for the first time

**August 27, 2016** - Kaepernick states, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color."

**August 29, 2016** - President Trump weighs in calling it, "a terrible thing."

**September 5, 2016** - President Obama says that he'd rather young people were engaged than "sitting on the sidelines".

**September 7, 2016** - NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell says, "Well my personal thoughts are... I support our players when they want to see change in society, and we don't live in a perfect society. We live in an imperfect society. On the other hand, we believe very strongly in patriotism in the NFL. I personally believe very strongly in that."

**March 3, 2017** - Kaepernick opts out of his 49ers contract insisting they would have cut him regardless

**August 12-13, 2017** - Marshawn Lynch, during his first game back post-retirement, and Michael Bennett sit for the anthem citing Charlottesville as one of the main reasons

**September 22, 2017** - Trump calls it a "disrespect of our heritage", during a rally in Alabama.

**September 23, 2017** - Trump withdraws invitation to NBA player Stephen Curry after Curry turned down an invitation to visit the White House, an NBA tradition following their title success.

**September 24, 2017** - Players respond to Trump's comments in a massive protest, much to the dismay of fans, particularly in Oakland. In Detroit, the actual person singing the national anthem took a knee and raised his fist, and players at an overseas game at Wembley Stadium knelt and linked arms, but stood during "God Save The Queen".

**September 25, 2017** - Trump continues to reference the NFL protests in a series of tweets.

**October 8, 2017** - Vice President Pence leaves a game after team members protest. Trump later takes credit for the departure. It is later estimated that it cost taxpayers approximately \$240,000.

**October 10, 2017** - NFL Commissioner sends a letter to NFL teams asking them to stand during the national anthem.

**October 30, 2017** - Texans owner Bob McNair makes a statement that includes the statement that owners couldn't have, "inmates running the prison", sparking a massive protest of over 200 NFL players, coaches and owners

**November 29, 2017:** "In an unprecedented move for a major professional sports league, the NFL has proposed partnering with its players to effect social justice change, though not all players are in agreement on the proposal."

**November 29, 2017:** Players Criticize N.F.L. Over Donation Proposal.

<http://www.irishnews.com/magazine/daily/2017/09/25/news/a-timeline-of-the-nfl-protests-from-colin-kaepernick-s-to-now-1145483/>  
<http://www.kiro7.com/news/local/timeline-of-nfl-protests-during-the-national-anthem/614679920>



## Appendix 2

**Papa John's Pizza**  @PapaJohns 14 Nov

The statements made on our earnings call were describing the factors that impact our business and we sincerely apologize to anyone that thought they were divisive. That definitely was not our intention. (1/3)

**Papa John's Pizza**  @PapaJohns 

We believe in the right to protest inequality and support the players' movement to create a new platform for change. We also believe together, as Americans, we should honor our anthem. There is a way to do both. (2/3)

7:10 PM - Nov 14, 2017

 1,566  583  1,194 

**Papa John's Pizza**  @PapaJohns 14 Nov

Replying to @PapaJohns

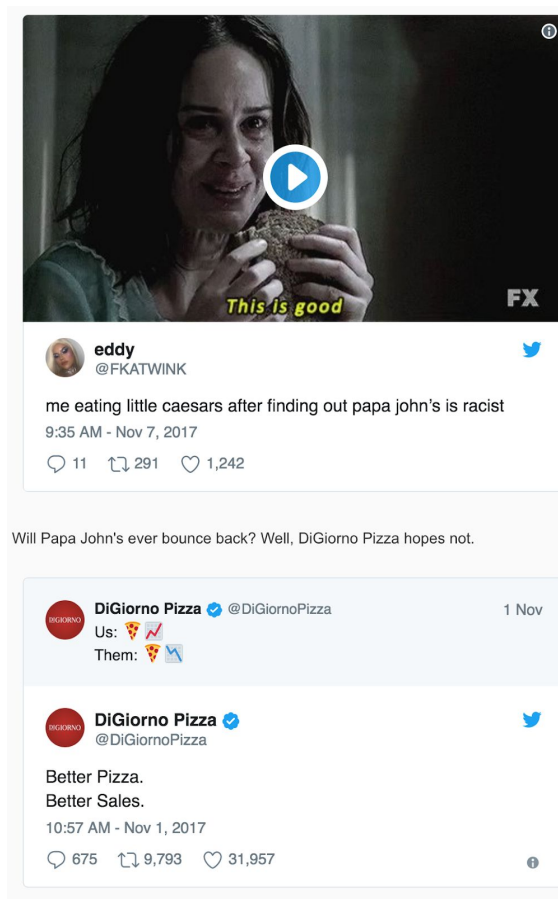
We believe in the right to protest inequality and support the players' movement to create a new platform for change. We also believe together, as Americans, we should honor our anthem. There is a way to do both. (2/3)

**Papa John's Pizza**  @PapaJohns 

We will work with the players and league to find a positive way forward. Open to ideas from all. Except neo-nazis — 🇺🇸 those guys. (3/3)

7:11 PM - Nov 14, 2017

 4,382  2,315  5,792 



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# Overexposure, Not Anthem

## Protests, Blamed for NFL's Ratings Woes

Television executives say flurry of new football offerings has backfired; 'It's just simple mathematics'



Media executives are rallying around an explanation for the National Football League's declining TV ratings: too much football available in too many places.

Total NFL ratings through the first seven weeks have declined 5%

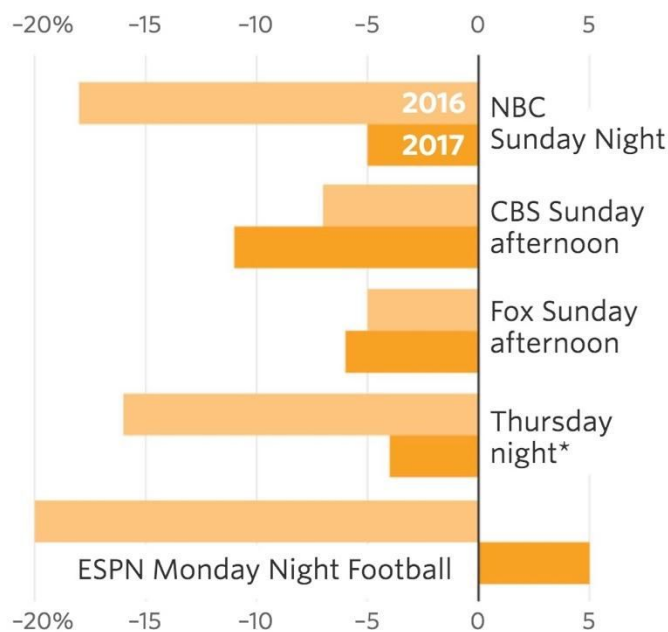
compared with last year and about 15% versus the same stretch in 2015, which was a very strong season for the league.

The league's aggressive media strategy in recent years has led to a flurry of new offerings: an increase of Thursday night games; games available on [Verizon](#) mobile phones and Amazon's streaming service; highlights on the NFL-owned cable channel RedZone and social-media platforms; and full-game replays on an NFL subscription service called GamePass. The fear among TV executives is that this has backfired, devaluing the programming.



“I think there’s a question mark for the NFL, which is just to think hard about how they are licensing,” James Murdoch, chief executive officer of [21st Century Fox](#) , said at a conference last week. The Fox network carries Sunday afternoon games. 21st Century Fox shares common ownership with Wall Street Journal parent [News Corp](#) .

## Losing Streak



### Overall NFL ratings are down, and some networks have fared worse than others

\*Thursday games are split up among CBS, NBC and NFL Network

Source: Nielsen data from networks

If the ratings erosion continues, media executives could pressure the league for better economic terms, but they won’t get a shot for a while. Most of the league’s major TV contracts don’t come up for renewal for four or five years. Collectively, major media partners spend about \$7.3 billion a year on NFL rights.

Other theories abound about what could be contributing to the decline, from frustration with the pace of games and the lack of compelling story lines to the overall pressure on traditional TV viewing as consumers drop cable packages in favor of digital services.

Another theory is that the controversy over players protesting during the national anthem has turned off viewers. That is the argument of NFL sponsor Papa John's, for example, which said Wednesday that the league's lower ratings have reduced the pizza chain's advertising exposure and hurt its sales.

Industry executives expect that a boycott of NFL games by fans upset over the protests would show up as a larger viewing decline in "red states"—those carried in the 2016 election by President Donald Trump, who has lambasted players on social media for kneeling during the anthem to protest racial and social injustice.

A recent HBO Real Sports/Marist poll showed that 84% of Trump supporters believe the NFL should require players to stand for the anthem; only 27% of Democrats hold that view.

Yet there is no evidence of a significant red-state boycott, according to data compiled for The Wall Street Journal by measurement firm Samba TV, which analyzes data from 13.5 million smart TVs across the country. Through seven weeks, the share of TVs tuning in to NFL games was down 8.7%, on average, in the "red states" while in blue states viewing was down 10%.

In Week 2, the red-state decline outstripped the blue-state decline considerably. But when Mr. Trump started tweeting his displeasure about the protests in Week 3, the NFL had its best year-over-year ratings performance of the season, and the red states were down just 1%. In the ensuing weeks the red and blue-state declines were generally even.

"The anthem protests have been less a factor than some people have claimed," said Michael Mulvihill, executive vice president of research at Fox. "Even though [Mr. Trump] elevated the issue, you haven't seen a negative impact."

The ratings declines haven't hurt all networks equally. The Sunday afternoon packages on Fox and [CBS](#) are taking the biggest hit while NBC's Sunday night package is down slightly. Monday Night Football on ESPN and Thursday Night Football, which is shared by CBS, NBC and the NFL Network, are both up.

Both Fox and CBS executives believe the Thursday night games have diminished interest in Sunday contests.

"I do think it's clear that adding 10 games to the Thursday night package and two additional Sunday morning London games has clearly diluted the Sunday afternoon packages and affected the ratings. It's just simple mathematics," said CBS Sports Chairman Sean Manus.

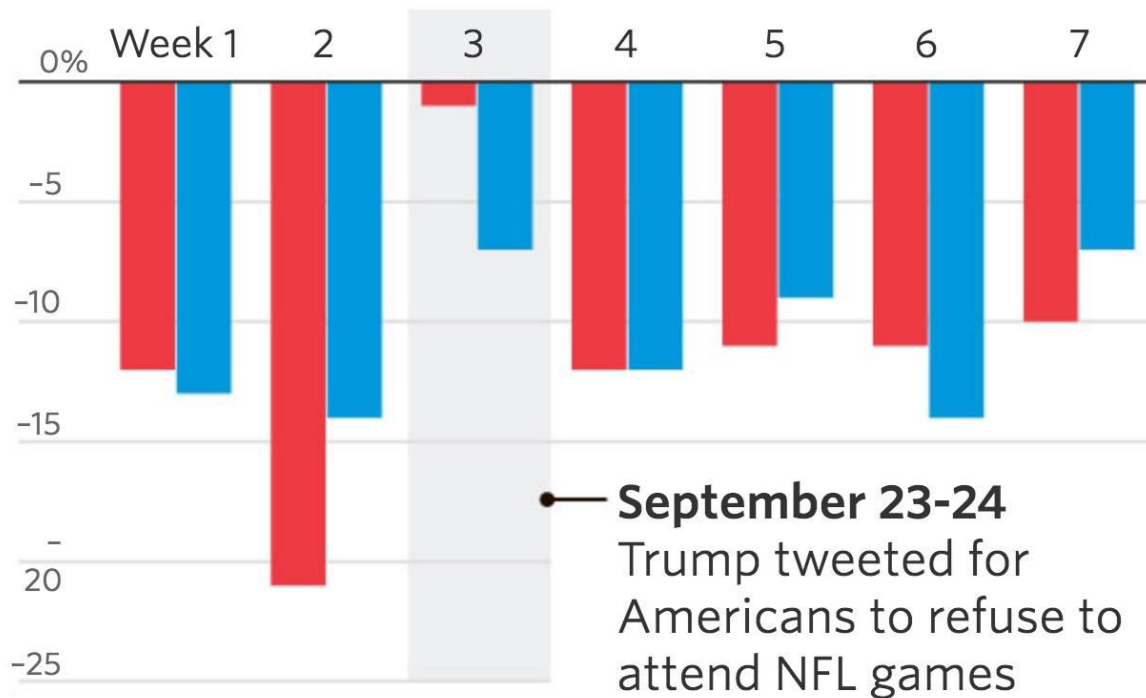
ESPN pushed the NFL for better games and this season its audience is up about 5% year-over-year.

NBC Sports Chairman Mark Lazarus said the NFL's rush to get highlights online is equivalent to providing "Cliffs Notes" to the games. "We're enabling fans to keep up and follow the game without watching the telecast," Mr. Lazarus said.

Brian Rolapp, the NFL's chief media and business officer, said, "We are always looking at how do you strike that balance between availability of games and exposure of teams to a national audience and a scarcity of windows."

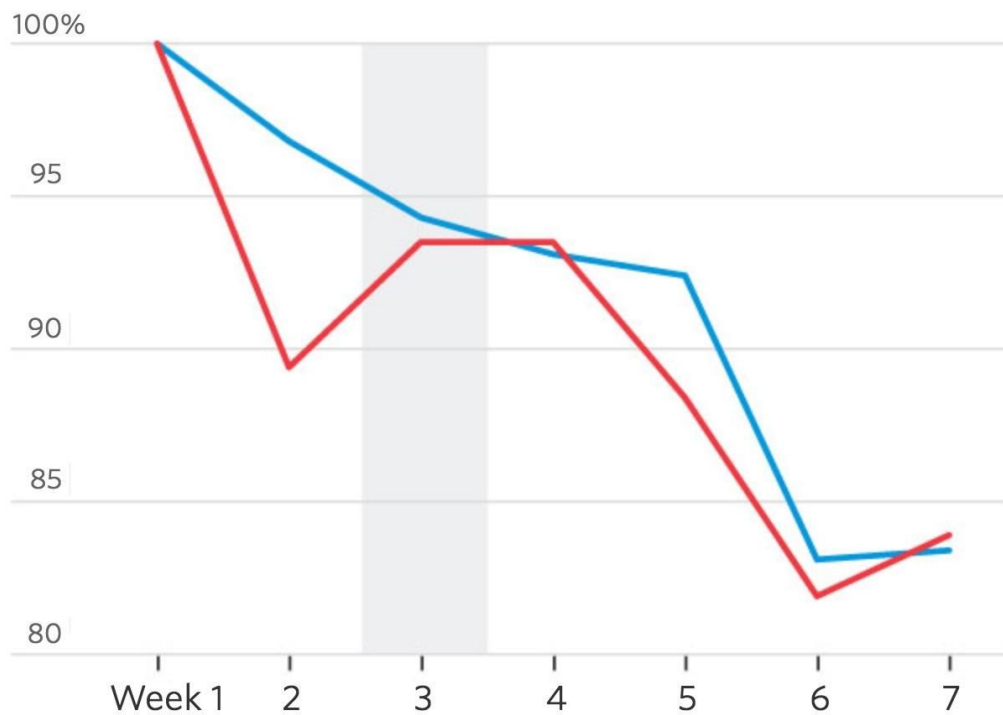
## Change from a year earlier in share of TVs tuning into NFL games for minimum of 10 minutes a week (2016-17)

■ Red states ■ Blue states



Both categories of states have retained about the same audience from Week 1 of this year.

## Percentage of Week 1 audience\* retained (2017)



\*Audience is TV screens tuned to NFL for at least 10 min per week. Note: Red states are defined as those carried by President Donald Trump in the 2016 election.

Source: Samba TV

## Expensive Ticket

The NFL has a host of long-term media deals in place, earning it over \$7 billion a year.

COMPANY	CONTRACT DETAILS	AVG/YEAR
NBC	Sunday nights (2013-2022) Thursday nights (2017-18)	\$950 million (sun), \$225 million (thurs)
CBS	Sunday afternoons (2013-2022) Thursday nights (2017)	\$1.08 billion (sun), \$225 million (thurs)
Fox	Sunday afternoons (2013-2022)	\$1.1 billion
ESPN	Monday nights (2013-2021)	\$1.9 billion
DirectTV	Sunday Ticket (through 2022)	\$1.5 billion
Verizon Mobile	Mobile rights for Sunday, Monday and Thursday nights (2013-2017)	\$250 million
Verizon's Go90	Sept 24 2017: One game in London	\$21 million
Amazon Prime	Thursday streaming (10 games) for one year	\$50 million

SHOWING 1 TO 8 OF 8 ROWS

## Anthem Effect (or Non-Effect)

Except for a blip in Week 2, viewership of NFL games in 'red states' hasn't declined more than in 'blue states.'

**Change from a year earlier in share of TVs tuning into NFL games for minimum of 10 minutes a week (2016-17)**

