

Conference 2000: Sports Journalism

“Why is sports journalism an oxymoron?” by E.W.Mason M.Ed, Senior Lecturer in Communication, UNITEC, Auckland

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The basic premise of my discussion here is that journalism and sport journalism are two separate areas of media work which demonstrate, to a certain degree, incompatible values, work cultures and professional outlooks. These differences impact significantly on news production, content selection and the place of objectivity in journalism.

The original idea came from a reference in Itule (1994 p.461) to American newspaper sports as “the toy department.” If, as Itule implies, mainstream news journalists regard their sports reporter colleagues as something less than ‘real’ journalists then here is a fruitful field for research and debate. It may also be worth studying the views of news consumers in this area.

If journalism can be defined as breaking stories and finding and reporting news then it may be that the perceived difference between ‘real’ news and sports news is the subject of what is being reported rather than any significant divergence in reporting methods and professional values. Thus, if sport is play then sports journalism is also a form of play.

This would, in my view, be far too simple to provide a satisfying explanation. I will argue that traditional work practices based on ‘round’ reporting (Lowes 1999 p.98) and the entertainment ethic which has influenced all media work (O’Neill 1994 p.11) combine to influence sports journalism more than mainstream reporting.

Media ownership patterns, commercial and technological convergence, (Herman & McChesney p.63-4, 75-7) social and personal attitudes to the place of sport in society all work to influence and direct sports journalism to an orientation which is often more entertainment than news.

Sports Journalism 2.

McNair (1998 p.6) is adamant that the field of “journalism is essentially ideological – a communicative vehicle for the transmission to an audience (intentionally or otherwise) not just of facts but of the assumptions, attitudes, beliefs and values of its maker(s), drawn from and expressive of a particular world-view.” From this highly academic and theoretical viewpoint sports journalism is not an oxymoron since sports journalism is ideological and reflects power relations in society.

I take the view that mainstream journalism, while ideological in the sense McNair describes, has more capacity for resistance through its internalised values than sports journalism which long ago was seduced by the entertainment and boosterish ethic which reflects the sports entertainment industry.

Much of the general writing accessed for this paper is North American so one could expect an outlook which accepts journalism as a profession with a significant, not to say crucial role to play in creation and nurturing of an informed democratic citizenry. The ideals of a pluralistic, liberal democratic society are embodied in the mainstream journalistic values of political neutrality, objectivity and balance (Tucker 1999 p.49,52,54).

This “competitive paradigm” (McNair p.19) may be taken as the point from which to begin a study of sports journalism. The pressures of modern, post-industrial societies militate against the ideals to which mainstream journalists and editors subscribe. The relentless impact of media mergers and acquisitions, marketing and public relations value sets and deregulated corporate power all conspire to undermine both directly and insidiously the original pluralist paradigm.

Sports departments are least well placed to resist since they have, in fact, been the least likely to want to resist. It’s not a problem if you can’t recognise it.

Sports Journalism 3.

Entertainment values, local identification, boosterism, hero worship and a reluctance to undermine the collective or individual pressures of rabid 'fandom' have all weakened the commitment of sports departments to balanced and objective reporting.

Lowes asserts that "Sports news is ideological precisely because it constitutes a discourse that serves the promotional interests of the major-league sports industry's primary stakeholders. ... This means that there is little room for news that doesn't promote the industry." (p.99) Lowes is here defining news as copy. The impact of such a conclusion for reporters must be "why write it if it doesn't get printed?"

It could be argued that in some senses journalism in the sports milieu is near impossible. After all, what kind of New Zealander is unenthusiastic about the All Blacks, Kiwis, David Tua, the Silver Ferns and so on? Nationalism in the form of the inclusive pronoun 'we' is an uncomfortable mix of marketing, patriotism, populist identification and 'me-too-ism' which infects and overwhelms the sports pages, radio and especially television.

The New Zealand Herald has assigned mainstream reporters and feature writers to sports stories. The Kevin Herlihy fraud feature and the important investigative story about the poaching of rugby stars in Auckland high schools first appeared in the general news or features pages. It would be worthwhile to find out why the sports department didn't write them. Could it be sports journalists aren't seen by the hierarchy as up to the task of real journalism or that the sports department is so compromised by association and identification with sport that it is incapable of taking an objective view. The issue merits further New Zealand research.

McNair (p.27) directly sums up Chomsky and Herman's 'propaganda model' in which a conglomeration of elites "subordinates the media to its own interests and controls information flows."

Sports Journalism 4.

Discourses of the powerful may become routine discourses in the media. If they coincide with already existing beliefs in the sports department about the value of competition and the importance of suffering pain for advantage then the corporate message is reinforced and further promulgated through an approved outlet and in relation to a highly valued subject. (Lowes p.99) Balance and fairness are dysfunctional beliefs in such a universe. Nonetheless it seems to me that one of the New Right's greatest achievements of the past decade or more is to get its discourse at centre stage in all political discussion. In a way New Right discourse has become so 'normalised' in the media that some terms such as reform have totally changed meanings but retained the positive connotations of the past. 'Regulation', on the other hand, has taken on a sinister connotation lacking two decades ago.

"This is to suggest that a newspaper account, far from simply reflecting the reality of a news event, is actually working to construct a codified definition of what should count as the reality of the event." (Allan 1999 p.87) Sports news consumers find themselves accepting the media's views including its selective coverage decisions as 'common sense'.

Of course these corporate pressures apply to mainstream news gathering and presentation as well but the capacity for resistance is greater, perhaps because the subjects being reported (politics, crime, economics, international and public affairs) are regarded as more intrinsically important by citizens/consumers and even the people gathering the 'news' themselves.

Mullen and Mazzocco's (2000 p.348) focus on the gridiron Super Bowl shows the biggest sports events "increasingly symbolise(s) the goals, values and culture of the corporate-based society where the pursuit of profit amid an abundant myth of winners and losers is played out on the sports field of battle."

Sports Journalism 5.

Sport has become a media commodity and an important, even critical, part of the content being delivered to

the readership/viewership. In fact the relationship is quite complex since an argument can be made that the sports pages create as well as sustain the fan interest which, in turn, requires regular feeding in the form of an endless stream of stories, snippets, photos and statistics. (Lowes p.9)

This 'morselisation' contributes to the pervasive belief that discussion of sport is shallow and trivial. The journalistic desire to "dig deeper" meets the perceived thinness and barrenness of the soil. "Shorter stories inevitably mean less context and less analysis to help readers or listeners understand what's really at stake." (Lieberman 2000 p.10)

The corporate universe establishes the context of modern sports journalism but does not go the entire way towards explaining why, or even if, sports journalism is an oxymoron. We still need to conduct further research into the work practices and professional outlooks of practitioners.

Sports reporting work is similar to much corporate employed work. Workers have specified tasks and work routines which produce a measurable product in a professionally acceptable format. There is a hierarchy and culture of behaviour and belief assigning values to people and product. (Lieberman p10)

Reporters report stories emanating from their assigned round. In the case of major professional sports such as rugby, cricket, league, netball, America's Cup and, increasingly, soccer, a major news outlet will assign a reporter to cover the round almost to the exclusion of other sports. This is where the issue of what, in an education and health care context, has been called 'provider capture'.

Sports Journalism 6.

Leitch wrote in *Whose News?* "That the news media are so heavily reliant upon a few dominant sources may generally act to reinforce existing power structures in society." (Leitch 1992 p.158) Reporters can become dependent on sources to the extent that loss of access to key sources can cost a reporter's job. Sports Illustrated's Rick Telander says "Beat reporters are useless if nobody talks to them." (Lowes p.80.) The recent case (October-November, 2000) of NZ Herald cricket writer Richard Boock's contretemps with NZ Cricket is a case in point.

Lowes (p.82) gets to the heart of the matter when he quotes leading Canadian sports columnist Dick Beddoes on the state of sports journalism. "I believe there is still a tendency amongst sports reporters to slant news in favour of the home team, to defer to local sports management for the sake of maintaining cordial working relationships, and to accept publicity handouts in place of digging for their own stories."

How has this state of affairs come about? Sports reporters, coaches and players work odd and long hours. Tours throw people together who might otherwise not socialise at all. A symbiotic relationship develops which has the effect of marginalising the traditional news values which news consumers still expect. Coaches, owners, public relations operatives and reporters share experience and perhaps, eventually, a world view that major sports are an important, even crucial, part of life, society and the economy. (Lowes p.81)

A related issue as an aside : Do sports 'news' consumers expect traditional news values or entertainment news? Perhaps they expect both but only get the latter. Surely this is a field for some qualitative research. The sports news media's perceived notions about its readership may be inaccurate or incomplete. "Journalists construct news account(s) against a backdrop of assumptions about the social world which they expect readers to share. (Allan p.92)

Sports Journalism 7.

Who is the readership? How do they think? What do they value? Who knows? Current research is directly related to marketing and advertising sales rather than a desire to know the audience.

One result of the beat system means that minor sports get little or no coverage whatsoever. In a professionalised sports universe some quite substantial New Zealand sports codes such as softball, athletics, hockey and swimming only get significant space in the sports pages during Olympic or Commonwealth Games campaigns. The rest of the time stringers fill the gaps in what the Sunday News

heads as Club Sport or the NZ Herald calls Details.

Elite minority sports such as equestrian and rowing appear as the exception. It would be interesting to investigate the relation of the amount of regular coverage to their elite status and heritage of Olympic success. Perhaps the recent tabloid fodder provided by equestrian is an aberration rather than the norm in allocating space to elite sport. In fact most of the 'news' in the Mark Todd case was on the front news pages rather than the sports section.

Soccer coverage in Auckland makes a good recent case study of changed coverage which proves the rule. The advent of the soccer Kingz as a professional Trans-Tasman competitor in Australia's National Soccer League has resulted in regular and significant space for soccer in the major print media.

It has also brought enhanced space and mana for reporters who previously had soccer as part of a multi-sport reporting brief. Soccer reporting is now a New Zealand job description.

An earlier case of the same phenomenon is the Auckland (now New Zealand) Warriors. A professional Winfield Cup franchise led to Rugby League claiming a significantly enhanced media profile and created a new class of League round reporters who did not previously justify the expense. In a sense the marketing machine created the media jobs.

Sports Journalism 8.

Prior to 1992 when the professional franchise was first mooted League fans needed a magnifying glass to find the Sydney scores. Now the minutiae of contracts, game statistics, betting odds, match reviews and previews take up entire pages in the print media and nightly reports on television. This flow of material is directly related to the beat system of reporting, thus a function of media work practices as much as public demand.

There has been no shortage of on and off field disasters to keep the Rugby League beat reporters busy and the reading public with something to read and discuss over the water cooler. What has been missing from the sports pages is any discussion about the desirability of keeping the corpse alive. The sports reporting fraternity along with local politicians, corporate leaders and media magnates seem agreed, at least tacitly, that having a professional sports franchise in a Trans-Tasman competition is a good thing.

The emphasis has been on entrepreneur Eric Watson and his celebrity lifestyle. No one seems to know what he 's worth, \$150 million or \$200 million (both figures appeared in the Herald in the same week) or what he will commit to the Warriors ' future but we know his wife is a former lingerie model, he owns top quality racehorses and is mates with television/sports personality Matthew Ridge.

There is little or no indication in the sports pages that sport is just another form of content on television much like movies, news, comedy and even pornography. The celebrity and entertainment values are overwhelming. The next case may well be Australian Rules which has staged successful pre-season matches in Wellington and recently announced \$450,000 in support for the New Zealand Australian Rules body over the next three years.

Sports Journalism 9.

The New Zealand body has just completed a three year,\$300,000 contract to develop the code in New Zealand. At one time last year Aussie Rules was the only free-to-air live televised sport in the country.

If what we have set out here is truly the case we may expect expanded Rules coverage in the print media as a direct result of a larger investment by the sport 's governing body.

However the media perception is that the sport must be major league to merit serious space. The fact that Rules is by far number one in Australia has not penetrated the local sports media 's consciousness. Most seem to think Rugby League is the top code despite the overwhelming verifiable, statistical evidence to the contrary.

This begs the question of the role of public demand for sports coverage. Most of what we have assessed so far in this paper has to do with what will be supplied to the passive readership/viewership. Marketers will tell us that the public demand is theirs to create.

Sports Illustrated once wrote of American professional sports league promoter Gary Davidson that "he was always willing to meet the demand for something which nobody asked for." Essentially what the sports pages do is help create and sustain the demand. It is good for the newspaper proprietor, the sports reporters and, eventually, the reading public once they realise this is something they wanted all along.

So what is missing from the sports pages which offers at least prima facie evidence that sports journalism is an oxymoron? Most glaring is the absence of any real discussion about the role of sport in society other than the manufactured debates about why we didn't win at the Olympics, who should be the All Black captain, whether Mark Todd should have come clean about his private life or most recently, why David Tua didn't throw a punch.

Sports Journalism 10.

Sport history is proffered as a series of mostly unrelated statistics and anecdotes. Larger than life characters, laddish tour stories, tabloid stories of loss and redemption dominate space to the exclusion of reflection and information. The booming tertiary sports education industry and its challenges are largely ignored by all media.

The advent of Radio Sport shows that public demand for debate is a vast maw waiting to be satisfied. The problem is that all that energy, interest and intelligence is not being satisfied by a sports press which has failed so abjectly to analyse the subject it purports to analyse. Unfortunately Radio Sport offers more of the same lack of consideration for a broader intelligence about sports.

Sports media consumers have little to go on if they want to debate wider issues, dare we say, political issues, to do with sport.

The reform of the NZ Herald Business section shows that business news consumers want and can handle a higher level of debate and use the media to support and develop it.

There appears no sign that the sports press has any such plans. Proprietors and editors seem to think business is a serious issue; sport is a diversion or a way to sell the media brand by association. The cultivation (Griffin 1997 p. 359) of the sports media consumer to see sport as professional, nationalistic, entertaining and supportive of corporate values may have gone so far that consumers might demand the current diet if the sports media tried to vary it. This is a fruitful area for future research.

Sports journalism is an oxymoron precisely because the widely accepted journalistic qualities of fairness, balance, intellect and insight are so often lacking. In fact those qualities seem to be less acceptable than ever because they operate against a background of entertainment-oriented, personalised news.