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An analysis of scripting using Goffman's natural and social frameworks: The case of the 2008 National Basketball Association Finals

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The media has played an integral role in the emergence of sport as a social institution. With the invention of the printing press the media vastly increased its reach while lowering costs of production and requiring more content; a process intensified by the televisual and now digital forms of the media. Thus, the sport/media complex formed (Jhally, 2006). Additionally, the media has been increasingly studied for both its influence on society (Billings, 2003, 2008; Eastman & Billings, 2000, 2001; Tudor, 1992, 2006). In addition, the viewing of important sporting events becomes “virtually mandatory” (Real & Mechikoff, 1992), which often results in higher viewership numbers because of the cultural importance of these events. Two examples are the Olympic Games and football/soccer World Cup.

Purpose

The intent of this study was to analyse how a broadcaster embedded both natural and social frameworks (Goffman, 1986) into the coverage of a finals series. Natural frameworks refer to the unguided or un-coerced consumption of an event. From beginning to end, these events have no influence from outside sources. The mediation of viewers and the reporting of sport on television are closely associated with social frameworks, which provide a background understanding of an event to viewers. Thus, play-by-play and colour commentators on television utilise social frameworks and they provide the audience with their opinion about the event.

During the telecasting of an event, the media seek to ensure that each match is framed utilising a consistent script for the duration of the series. These frames ensure that audience attention can be maintained or increased during the event. To analyse whether natural and social frameworks are embedded into the coverage of a series the 2008 NBA finals were examined, which is an event that occurs annually in June. This series features the Western Conference winner against that of the Eastern Conference and takes place over a two-week period. Thus, there is ample time and opportunity for a broadcaster to alter the framing of the finals.

Literature Review

The key business practice of the media is to sell viewers – in large numbers – to sponsors and advertisers (Condry, 1989). McLuhan (2001) wrote that sponsors and advertisers “buy a piece of the [...] viewer as definitely as if they hired our homes for a public meeting” (p. 224). Thus, it is important for a media outlet to ensure that it is able to garner viewers in large numbers, who are commodified and on-sold to sponsors and advertisers.

Although it might appear that the media can easily create, build, and maintain an audience over time, the shifting nature of sporting events (e.g., occurring in venues, cities, regions, countries for different audiences), demands that the media create and foster multiple narratives to create multiple reasons for watching sport or a sport event (Chalip, 1992). Often, major sporting events take place over a set period of time, which allows the media to provide the audience with a “world construction” of the event(s) (Tudor, 1992). As such, these events are often the site for study due to their economic and cultural importance (Alabarces, Tomlinson, & Young, 2001; Billing & Eastman, 2002; Billings & Tambosi, 2004; Poulton, 2004; Tudor, 1992).

Televised media events are often framed in order to evoke emotion in viewers (Harris, 2004) and provide viewers with more motives to watch a sporting event; thus, to foster sustained viewing. Through the creation of multiple narratives, the media employ framing techniques, which occur when a broadcaster selects some aspect of communication and provides it with extra salience or emphasis (Entman, 1993), while hindering or deemphasising the salience of other aspects.

Research Design

This study was carried out using content analysis to uncover the prevalence of natural and social frameworks during the coverage of the 2008 NBA finals. Each game was transcribed verbatim and a grounded theory approach was utilised to examine the data. A second trained coder randomly selected and analysed 15 percent of the transcription to ensure reliability of the coding. Inter-coder reliability exceeded 85 percent, which is considered acceptable. Due to the length of the finals, it was important for the American Broadcasting Corporation to provide the audience with more reasons to watch an entire telecast or the entire series for reasons other than the “sight and sound” of an event (Rowe, 2004).

Implications and Discussion

The aim of this study is to uncover the frequency and types of natural and social frameworks used by a broadcaster to increase audience interest in an event. As announcers provide meaning to the audience (Allan, 1998) through the description of the competitors, which may possibly influence how a viewer perceives the participants. Through framing, the media provide additional motivations for viewing sport; thus, increasing audience size. Seventeen themes emerged that the ABC used during the telecast of the finals, which will be presented at the conference. The types of social frameworks and the application of these during sporting telecasts will add to the body of knowledge surrounding sport media events.