

"CHEERING FOR THE OWNED TEAM": MEDIA FRAMING OF A SPORT CRISIS

Anthony K. Kerr
La Trobe University

Aim of abstract/paper - research question

The National Rugby League's (NRL) Melbourne Storm dominated headlines in April 2010 when it breached the salary cap by more than \$3 million over a five-year period and orchestrated the biggest fraud in Australian sport history. The club was stripped of two premiership titles, fined and was unable to accrue competition points for the remainder of the season, threatening the franchise's viability. To further complicate matters, the Storm is a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Limited, at the time a partner of the NRL.

This study compares coverage of the scandal across four key metropolitan newspapers: the *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney), *The Age* (Melbourne) and *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney). These have been selected to allow for direct comparisons by geographic location and ownership:

Herald Sun	The Age	Melbourne
Daily Telegraph	Sydney Morning Herald	Sydney
News Limited	Fairfax	

Sport journalists play an important role in society and act as a conduit between the public and the sport organisation. Sport media professionals should not 'cheer on the home team' nor, as an unwelcome by-product of the corporate ownership of sport, 'cheer on the owned team', and so the following questions are addressed:

- 1) Did reporting of the salary cap scandal differ significantly between the home town locations of the newspapers?
- 2) Did corporate ownership of the newspaper influence its reporting of the salary cap scandal?

Theoretical background or literature review

The purpose of this study was to examine the framing of a sport crisis in the print media and to examine whether ownership of the media publication led to perceived bias by the journalist(s). This research draws on framing theory which postulates that in the presentation of information—and the attendant decision making regarding: inclusion and exclusion of information; language; and structure of information—attitudes, opinions, and beliefs are shaped (Entman, 1993). The exclusion or inclusion of specific information sends a message about the relative importance of the material excluded or included (Entman, 1993), thus, frames communicate more than the fact of an event or issues: they 'determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits'; they 'identify the forces creating the problem'; they 'evaluate causal agents', and they 'offer and justify treatments for the problems' (Entman, 1993, 52).

Sport journalism is a popular career choice for media professionals, yet many non-sport colleagues use the phrase 'toy department' to describe their chosen profession (Garrison & Salwen, 1989). This criticism is based on the perception that sport journalists are more likely to promote sport through their media coverage, rather than to report objectively. The bias in coverage of home teams, or 'boosterism', is perceived to be a common practice, often because journalists have cultivated personal relationships with team management and players (Hardin, 2005; Reinardy, 2004). Furthermore, journalists often frame an issue to provide context and create meaning for their readers or to emphasise certain aspects of a story.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

A content analysis of the newspapers examines the coverage of the scandal. The sample was limited to the *Herald Sun*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and *The Daily Telegraph* from Friday, April 23, 2010 – the day the story 'broke' – to Friday, April 30, 2010. Each newspaper was scanned for articles that covered the crisis, resulting in a total of 445 articles. Each article was coded utilising established qualitative coding methods (cf. Corbin & Strauss, 2008) using NVivo software, then analysed using principles of discourse analysis and framing theory to identify the frames applied to the reporting of this crisis.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions**

Throughout the data collection period, 445 individual articles from the four newspapers were recorded, spread relatively evenly across the four outlets. The analysis identified clear differences in the framing of the actors within this crisis, with the athletes and coaches being viewed in a more sympathetic light, compared to the overt criticism of the CEO and those involved in the corrupt management practices.

This paper argues that the role of the media is to disseminate information to the public, in the case of this crisis, this role was compromised by boosterism and parochialism, and further complicated by the conflated ownership relationships of the NRL and the newspapers.

References

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