

Paper Title: Thematic Framing of the 2007 National Basketball Association Finals: An Analysis of Announcer Discourse during a series of discrete, yet linked events

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Abstract

Past research into sport event broadcasting suggests that broadcasters often exhibit bias in their reporting. Through broadcast discourse, networks attempt to create polysemic structures to provide viewers with multiple storylines to build and maintain audiences throughout an event. A content analysis was conducted on the 2007 National Basketball Association (NBA) finals series in order to analyse the discourse of the play-by-play and colour commentators of the American Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) telecasts of the finals. Results of this study found differences in announcer discourse surrounding the two competing teams: the San Antonio Spurs and the Cleveland Cavaliers.

Key Words: Sport Media, Framing, NBA

Introduction

There are few events on the annual sporting calendar with the appeal to capture society's attention in large numbers, as do cyclic events such as the Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, or the football (soccer) World Cup. These events capture audience attention and make viewing "virtually mandatory" (Real & Mechikoff, 1992, p. 325). To gain such attention, broadcasters ensure that the content of broadcasts do not solely focus on the "sight and sound" (Rowe, 2004, p. 172) of the event. Thus, they embed multiple storylines and narratives (Chalip, 1992; Chalip, Green, & Velden, 2000) into a telecast to ensure that all viewers are provided with numerous reasons to watch that event (Harris, 2004; Wenner, 1998).

Studies of sport media events are often centered on the media's ability to construct "social and cultural meanings far beyond the world of sport" (Tudor, 2006, p. 219) in their coverage, in order to attract and maintain the largest possible number of readers or viewers throughout an event. The NBA finals are a best-of-seven games event held each June as the culmination of a six-month regular season and several play-off rounds. This study focused on a neutral broadcaster's ability to embed multiple themes and storylines into the coverage of the NBA finals in order to capture, build, and thus retain viewers over the course of a series of linked, yet discrete events.

Literature Review

One central theme in contemporary media practice is to entertain an audience. Wilson, Gutierrez, and Chao (2003) noted that a central "function of the media [is] for diversion and enjoyment, in which the media provide stories, features, music, and films to make audiences laugh, cry, relax, or reflect rather than gain information" (p. 40). Related to entertainment are the concepts of ratings and advertising, which led Altheide and Snow (1978) to comment that television "programs are commercials for commercials" (p. 190) and that "the goal and logic of television is mainly economic – supply and demand – keep them both high" (p. 190). In many societies, consuming media absorbs a large part of available individual discretionary time. Consequently, Nichols, Moynahan, Hall, and Taylor (2002) observed that "adults spend more than half of their waking lives in contact with the media" (p. 2).

Due to the media's reach, made consistently easier through technological advancements (i.e., from the printing press [Anderson, 1991] to current video on demand and

internet based technologies), and the urbanisation of Western society (Hall & Jowett, 1995) enabled the key media outlets of newspapers, television, and radio to become the “single largest focus of leisure-time activity and means of entertainment” (McQuail, 1994, p. 1). The media’s role in society has also increased, thus enabling it to become a strong cultural entity.

The broadcasting and reporting of sport events is associated with embedding social frameworks into a broadcast (Goffman, 1986). Social frameworks are defined as providing “background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence (sic), a live agency, the chief one being the human being” (Goffman, 1986, p. 22). Chalip, Green, and vander Velden (2000) found that polysemic structures (i.e., discourses that can have multiple meanings) include several narratives or storylines that are able to attract greater viewer numbers and to win their loyalty to certain media which in turn increased the value of sponsorships.

In order to commodify and sell the audience to advertisers, media networks need to ensure that viewers return in large numbers to their programs. The concept of framing is based on the notion of recognition and recall (Goffman, 1986). Through the use of encoded messages in a broadcast, the media attempts to mediate its audience through symmetry between the experiences of the viewer and the encoded messages. This is related to Hall’s (1973) notion of providing viewers with “meaningful discourse” (p. 4); that is, to prime viewers to decode discourse in the manner intended by a broadcaster.

Sport events are often a site for the study of sport’s cultural influence, as well as for understanding the media effects on cultures. Billings and Tambosi (2004) found that the United States of America’s (US) media was biased in its coverage of the US football team during the 2002 World Cup as their players received more comments and with higher quality discourses than those of the Brazilian players, despite Brazil winning the cup. Clearly this was to develop an audience in a non-traditional sport.

Studies of sport events reveal many characteristics such as media effects and bias (e.g. Billings & Tambosi, 2004; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Sabo, Jansen, Tate, Duncan, & Leggett, 1996) used to promote and describe an event. In their study of the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, Billings and Angelini (2007) found that broadcast frames can be transferred from announcers to the audience; thus, broadcast discourse has a strong cultural element and provides meaning to the viewers. Also found in other studies on the Olympic Games, was that a host country broadcaster skews its coverage of the event (e.g., Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings & Eastman, 2002; Daddario, 1994; Eastman & Billings, 1999; Larson & Rivenburgh, 1991) to include more segments from a “home country” frame that creates and fosters more viewership.

Through the sport/media nexus, the relationship between sport and the public is strengthened. Broadcasters attempt to mediate events through construction of a specific announcer discourses (Moragas Spa, Rivenburgh, & Larson, 1995). This is easier through technological advancements such as the Internet and Video-on-demand noted above. Media events such as the Olympic Games or Commonwealth Games also have the capacity to become holiday-like events (Dayan & Katz, 1992) because of their scale, social importance, and the mediation resulting from framing techniques.

Based on available literature, there is a need to uncover how non-global sport events, the participating teams, and regular occurring sport events are framed by a broadcaster. Therefore, the following research questions were posed:

RQ 1: Are there certain comment types more attributable to the San Antonio Spurs team than to the Cleveland Cavaliers team?

RQ 2: Are there certain comment types more attributable to the Cleveland Cavaliers team than the San Antonio Spurs team?

Method

The 2007 NBA final series comprised four games or events featuring the San Antonio Spurs and the Cleveland Cavaliers. These games comprised the sample. A content analysis was conducted based on the ABC's apparently neutral live coverage of the series. Only the live play-by-play coverage commentary was included in the analysis (and not the pre-game, halftime, and post-game segments). The investigation began when the pre-game studio announcers ended their segment and the play-by-play and colour commentators began their discourse. Frequently, this occurred several minutes prior to the actual tip-off. To begin analysing commentary before the actual game started provided yet another indication of the framing of each game and of the series.

As Tudor (1992) found, the pre-game studio analysts will often begin to frame the game being broadcast and the play-by-play and colour commentators use a discourse that does not deviate from that pre-programmed frame. Tudor explained that the "commentary-driven process of 'world construction' can be seen at its clearest in those televised sporting occasions which extend over a considerable period of time" (p. 391-392). Thus, broadcasters embed frames into the discourse of an event to ensure that a frame is sustained throughout the duration of an event allowing the audience to focus on multiple storylines while watching that event or series of events.

Analysing a series of games allows the research to discover any differences between successful competitors; whereas the discourse surrounding a weak competitor may be vastly different. Thus, the NBA finals provided an avenue into uncovering how discourse may change over a series of one-off or discrete, but linked sport events. The four games analysed were broadcast on June 7, 10, 12, and 14 in 2007. The San Antonio team won the series.

Instrumentation

The NBA finals were analysed using a modified taxonomy that was the foundation for a previous sport media study on football's 2006 World Cup (Scott, Hill, & Zakus, under review). Thus, several adjustments were made to the taxonomy to best represent a professional North American event context and to determine appropriate broadcast themes to measure their frequency during and between games. Holsti's method of inter-coder reliability was used and this exceeded 84.2%. The development of contextual codes to effectively portray basketball games was accomplished through an analysis of the first match of the series between the two finalists

In all, fifteen categories or discourse frames were derived and used in the content analysis. These are: 1) athleticism, "He is so athletic around the rim"; 2) appearance/looks, "Looks tired today; Look at the sweat on his shirt"; 3) background, "He stands 6 foot, 5 inches", "He plays in the summer for Argentina"; 4) motivation, "He really went for it there"; 5) skill, "He is a great three-point shooter", "He is the all-time leader in field goal percentage for his team"; 6) history, "They played in the 2005 championships together"; 7) work ethos, "He was always practicing these shots in practice for his club"; 8) leadership, "The other players follow his lead"; 9) mentality/composure, "He has a high basketball IQ"; 10) creativity, "He is such a clever player; A master with the ball"; 11) speed, "He is so quick with the ball in the open court"; 12) experience, "He has never played in the finals"; 13) negative descriptors, "A poor defensive play there", "He could have concentrated better"; 14) positive descriptors, "Nice pass there", "Great vision"; and 15) coaching, "He is a rookie coach", "Has won five finals".

The data were analysed using the transcription sheets, which were independently verified for accuracy of content and context by a second trained researcher. Next, these

transcription sheets were used to record (a) which announcer was uttering each description, (b) the team of the player being described, (c) and the resultant descriptor code.

Results

Final analysis of this series provided evidence to understand the framing of this series. In total, there were 1155 descriptive comments (discourse frames), of which 715 or 61.9% were for the Cleveland team and 440 or 38.1% were for the San Antonio team. Non-parametric chi-square tests were conducted using equal proportions and using commentary percentages as the expected score. In the analysis of broadcast television, expected scores are often adjusted to reflect the overall total as this is “practical because if [one] team received the bulk of commentary, they would also receive the lion’s share of comments in each of the subcategories” (Billings & Tambosi, 2004, p. 161). Thus testing at a 50/50 ratio may yield additional significant results, which may not prove significant if expected scores are adjusted to reflect overall proportion of commentary.

Significant results found at the 50/50 ratio were: Appearance χ^2 (df=1, N = 16) = 4.000, $p < 0.046$, Skill χ^2 (df=1, N = 51) = 4.412, $p < 0.036$, History χ^2 (df=1, N = 54) = 10.667, $p < 0.001$, and Negative Descriptors χ^2 (df=1, N = 30) = 16.133, $p < 0.001$.

Significant results found at the overall commentary percentage were: Skill χ^2 (df=1, N = 51) = 10.794, $p < 0.001$, History χ^2 (df=1, N = 54) = 4.484, $p < 0.034$, and Negative Descriptors χ^2 (df=1, N = 30) = 10.120, $p < 0.001$.

At a practical level, the framing of this event favoured the Cleveland team, as it received the bulk of the commentary. However, at an applied level, the San Antonio team were portrayed more positively, as skill comments favoured this team, while Cleveland was portrayed more negatively.

Discussion

This study achieved its goal of understanding the framing and discourse employed in the broadcast of an annual sport event. Analysis of the portrayals of both teams found marked differences in the amount of commentary for each team. In regards to the particular endeavours of this study nearly sixty percent of the comments were for Cleveland, yet this team lost each game of the finals. Thus, the marked difference in the quantity of commentary was provided to the Cleveland team. In the commentary percentage analysis, two of the three significant results favoured the Cleveland team: History and Negative Descriptors. San Antonio was characterised as more Skilful. Thus, comments about skill were more readily attributable to this team and explains research question 1.

Both Negative Descriptors and Skill can be explained by the play of both teams. San Antonio won each of the games and was, one assumes, more skilful. As Cleveland lost each game, it is most likely they made more mistakes and thus were negatively described. Consequently, in regards to research question two, both History and Negative Descriptors were more readily attributable to Cleveland.

It was unanticipated that the Cleveland team would receive significantly more comments in the History category, as this was the first occasion that the Cavaliers played in a final series. Many of the History comments concerned the City of Cleveland and its general sporting successes or failures, as well as those of the Cavaliers team and players. The Spurs, however, have won several championships and have, in the past, been successful. Thus, historical commentary might not have been as readily needed as viewers would be more familiar with this team (resulting in Cleveland receiving the bulk of the comments).

This study was successful in revealing differences in the overall commentary of the NBA Finals and, thus, the framing of this event by the broadcaster through the construction of discourses that transcended sport.

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