

# 10

## Sport and the Media

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### Overview

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### CONTEXT AND KEY ISSUES

In many ways, both today's sport and the media are classic outcomes and, indeed, icons of the far-reaching social, economic and technological change that characterised the twentieth century. Each has developed extensively and rapidly as a major global industry. Each plays a significant part in structuring and informing people's lives. Each has a global as well as more local scope of operation and has the structures and practices to reflect this. Importantly, they are two industries tied together in complex networks of relationships. Their respective histories of development have been fuelled and influenced by the dynamics of this partnership. The evidence of the partnership is all too apparent. The wellbeing of particular sports or, indeed, sport as whole has become linked

to income generated directly or indirectly from the media. The way in which sport fills newspaper pages and television and radio schedules bears testimony to the influence it has on the structure and extent of media activity.

However, partnerships are not always equal, stable or constructive for those involved. In this chapter, consideration will be given to a number of themes and issues that characterise the link between sport and the media. Difficulties and tensions exist but ultimately a media sports product emerges whether it is, for example, a live TV broadcast of the Olympic Games or a newspaper report on a local rugby match. This raises a series of issues about the nature of the product. Does the media presentation of sport mirror reality or is it a representation and a construction reflecting the media's objectives and the influences and practices

of the professionals working in it? Such questions will also be considered later but they in turn introduce the part played by the audience for media sport. For example, is the viewer knowledgeable about the sports products on offer to them and do they exercise choice about what they view and how they receive the messages and influences inherent in the programmes? The chapter will conclude by addressing this conundrum. Questions about the genesis and content of media products and the influences impacting on them figure prominently in what is a growing sociology of sport literature on media sport (see in particular Kinkema and Harris, 1998; Maguire, 1999; Rowe, 1999; Wenner, 1998; Whannel, 1992).

The mass media entered the twentieth century with the emphasis on the printed word. Today, in the early years of the twenty-first century, it is television and radio that are to the fore. Satellite-based multinational companies like BSkyB TV have appeared on the scene and are now major players in the global sport media marketplace. There are new developments like the Internet which have further extended media activities. Sport has long been an important aspect of media output but more recently there has been a growth in specialist media sports products. Dedicated sports-only TV channels (e.g. SkySport1), radio stations (e.g. TalkSport), and publications (e.g. Sports First) have appeared in ever increasing numbers.

The exposure to and consumption of media products, including those concerned with sport, have increased dramatically. A Henley Centre report has gone as far as to suggest that people in the UK spend nine hours a day consuming media in its various forms, with television viewing occupying the equivalent of a day a week. (*Financial Mail on Sunday*, 31 Jan. 1999: 38). Television

has, indeed, become a principal leisure activity and source of information. Through it we gather our knowledge not only of our immediate world but also of the complex global village in which we now live. It acts as a key socialisation agent and is integral to framing, determining and influencing our picture of reality. Our experience of sport has become increasingly constructed and ordered through television output.

Sport has become 'big business'. It is now a well-established global industry with international organising bodies, like the International Olympic Committee (IOC), eager to promote and structure its further development. Sport, but not necessarily in all its forms, has something to sell. It has its events, leagues, clubs and elite performers. Sport can make money but the costs involved, not least the large rewards paid to the top performers in some sports and the capital and revenue expense of increasingly spectacular sports stadiums, has left it with an insatiable appetite for more and more funding. The world of sport is a competitive one, not just in terms of which team tops the league or who wins the gold medal, but also which sports are able to attract the greatest financial resources. The relationship with the media is central to the political economy of sport. Traditionally, it was the medium through which key information like schedules of events/matches, venues and times was transmitted to the public. Today, the media, primarily television, offer sport-added attractions in terms of finance from broadcasting fees and exposure to advertisers, sponsors and a wider audience. Hence there is the all too apparent readiness of sports organisations to get involved with the media. However, alongside the obvious benefits come some possible costs to sport. To link with the media has meant sport losing a degree of control over its own activities and destiny. The

promise of media attention and the wide-ranging spin-offs (in terms of increased profile, status and finance, greater numbers of participants and spectators and enhanced attractiveness to sponsors and advertisers) make such loss of control something sports organisations appear willing to accept (Goldlust, 1987). The ability to appreciate and deal with the full extent of the consequences of its partnership with the media is a major challenge confronting sport in the twenty-first century.

## THE SPORT-MEDIA PARTNERSHIP

### The media: competition and control

The media sport production process involves the sports organisations, e.g. the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the governing body of world football, working with the media companies. The sports bodies may do this directly or through intermediary marketing and promotional agencies operating on their behalf. They may engage with the media as individual companies or in partnership with others. The media organisation concerned may be a quasi-governmental body, like the British Broadcasting Company, or a multinational global commercial one such as BSkyB. A sport has something to sell, such as the TV and radio broadcasting rights to cover its world championships, and it is up to the media companies to submit bids. The competition to become the agreed lead broadcaster can be intense, although the sheer size of the financial undertaking can lead to fierce media rivals working together on a bid. In the example of FIFA selling the rights to its World Cup, the sums involved are considerable and

the bidding and decision-making processes are complex and sensitive. Competition for broadcasting rights and the prominence of sport in media schedules have had a dramatic inflationary effect on the fees paid to some sports. An early globally televised Olympics, such as the 1964 Tokyo Games, cost the lead broadcaster around £1m. More recently, it has been reported that the US broadcaster NBC has paid the IOC \$3.5bn for the rights to the Winter Olympics of 2002 (Salt Lake City) and 2006 (Turin) and the Summer Olympics of 2004 (Athens) and 2008 (Beijing). These massive sums of money have to be balanced out by the very considerable amount of airtime that can be filled by such events. Indeed, sports broadcasting can be seen as a relatively cheap way to fill schedules. Sports events can also be particularly useful for the all-important audience ratings by attracting large numbers of viewers and listeners. For example, ITV in the UK attracted 23.2 million viewers, some 80 per cent of the available television public, for the England versus Argentina football match at the 1998 World Cup finals. The number of viewers peaked to almost 27 million during the penalty shoot out! (*Sport First*, 3 Jan. 1999: 16).

A successful bidder's production costs for a major global sports event will involve the expense incurred in securing the broadcasting rights plus a heavy investment in people, accommodation, travel and equipment. It is not surprising therefore that a media company will endeavour to exercise considerable control over the event. If the sporting event concerned is not one that is deemed to be particularly attractive, then to get the media on board may involve the sports organisation accepting an especially weak bargaining and control position. Even when the sports organisation involved is powerful, such as the IOC or FIFA, there is still a trade-off in terms of a loss of control.

This can lead to significant changes in sport, for example, to dates, times and venues. The actual structure and presentational style of an event may be strongly reflective of the media's interests. Football's World Cup competition is an example of a particularly large-scale and well-established sport event but it is still not immune from media preferences. Indeed, loss of control needs to be considered whenever a sports organisation, however local and small, gets involved with the media. Many more sports and events are vying for media money and to an extent, the media, notably television with its schedules to fill, are not averse to encouraging sports bodies to approach them.

The rise in the numbers and influence of the private media companies has had a number of important consequences. The private sector is characterised by the existence of some large-scale monopolistic groupings. Global media entrepreneurs like Rupert Murdoch, Alan Bond, Kerry Packer and Silvio Berlusconi have recognised the value of media sport and each has, to a varying degree, made a significant impact on the world of sport. BSkyB in the UK, FoxTV in North America and Channel Seven in Australia form just part of Murdoch's extensive News Corporation media empire. Each has won major sports contracts and invested heavily in sports-related programming. Murdoch's activities cover radio, TV and newspapers and have put him in a powerful position to direct media sport developments. In some cases, these multinational media companies have gone further and strengthened their controlling opportunities by actually moving into sport's ownership through investing in clubs. BSkyB's ambitious, but eventually thwarted, attempt to take a controlling stake in Manchester United is a telling case in point.

Another important control aspect of global media sport is the power exercised by the North American media market. The upward explosion in certain broadcasting fees has been fuelled largely by US media money. Sport on television is particularly popular in the USA and the advertising revenue the media companies can obtain on the back of sports coverage can be enormous. For example, advertising slots around TV coverage of the American Football's Superbowl can cost many thousands of dollars per second.

In the UK, the private satellite-based companies have put themselves in a powerful position with regard to their terrestrial and, sometimes, public sector competitors. BSkyB started buying up the right to cover events and sports as soon as it appeared in the UK. Sport was seen as a particularly useful product through which to sell subscriptions to its service. There had always been competition to broadcast some sports. However, the emergence of BSyB injected new dynamism into the media sport marketplace and highlighted the differential abilities of media organisations to compete financially.

The licence-fee-funded BBC, which for so long had enjoyed a high reputation for its sports programming, has found itself unable to match the sports resources available in the private sector, principally the satellite companies. It has lost out on the rights to cover many major sports or particular events and is now criticised for what appears to be a lack of commitment to sport. Flagship BBC programmes like *Grandstand*, for decades Britain's leading media sports product, has become marginalised as it has sought to fill its time with an increasingly limited diet of available events. From season 2001/02, another symbol of the BBC's long-standing contribution to sport (i.e. its Saturday evening football highlights programme), has been lost to

another terrestrial channel (i.e. ITV), albeit working in partnership with BSkyB. Whilst the BBC may be marginalised in the media sport marketplace, other UK media organisations like ITV and Channel 4 have looked to increase their involvement. The latter has wide sporting interests and has invested in motor racing, Italian football, WWF (wrestling) and cricket. To a degree, competition for sports to cover has extended the choice for the television viewer but the question of access is a somewhat more complex question.

### Issues of access and equity

As media sport has risen in prominence, so questions have to be asked about whether this represents sport for all or only for some. The extensive involvement of satellite companies and their array of dedicated sports-only channels have clearly led to a major extension of the range and number of sports choices available to viewers. However, this has come at a financial cost to the viewer in terms of the equipment (e.g. satellite discs) and regular subscriptions that are required. These kinds of financial factors, allied to the satellite companies' growing domination of broadcasting rights, highlight the issue of equity in the sense of media sport becoming primarily the preserve of those people who can afford it. Interestingly, the greater involvement, indeed in some ways the re-emergence, of ITV in the media sport marketplace has been through the introduction of a subscription-based channel. The financial implications for the viewer are likely to become even more problematic as the private companies offer more sport on a 'pay-to-view' basis. This involves events (e.g. boxing championships and selected English Premier League football matches), which

require the viewer to make a one-off payment on top of their subscription. The introduction of BSkyB's 'pay-to-view' facility (i.e. Sky Box Office), is representative of what may be the greatest challenge to wide access to media sport.

Governments, particularly in the European Union, have been encouraged to respond to this equity concern, particularly when it is access to major national sporting events that is coming under threat. In 1996, ironically one media form (newspapers), led a 'Save our Sport' campaign in the UK which opposed the movement of sports events to the satellite companies. Government intervention was called for. The campaign arose in response to Sky buying up, and attempting to monopolise, the media coverage of top sporting events. An example of Sky's success was the obtaining of the rights to golf's Ryder Cup. The significance and concerns at the time can be summed up in the following quote from a disgruntled BBC producer: 'They've sold it to a station nobody watches. It's like buying *Gone with the Wind* and showing it at the bottom of a coalmine'. (*The Mail on Sunday*, 14 Jan. 1996: 86). In the UK, there are a number of 'jewels in the sporting calendar', like the Football Association's Cup Final and the Wimbledon tennis championships, which are on a special government list requiring them to be broadcast on terrestrial TV. This list has protected opportunities for the media sport consumer but it is a safeguard constantly under threat as the satellite media companies see a valuable and popular commodity beyond their grasp and the sports organisations involved see potentially lucrative events being kept out of the broadcasting rights marketplace.

Interestingly, both FIFA and the IOC have resisted approaches from BSkyB on the grounds that a satellite-based broadcaster did not offer access to the highest possible

audience. This is not to say that FIFA and the IOC have not gone some way towards appeasing the media. Both these world bodies have extended the number and the scale of their international flagship events. In doing so they have provided even more broadcasting opportunities. The FIFA World Cup finals now involve more teams than previously and the event extends over a longer time period. Such specific changes in sport are now, to a large extent, often part of a deliberate response to the pressures and promises of being part of the media sport partnership.

### **The media involvement in the changing face of sport**

Media's increasing involvement in, and control over, sport and sports organisations has put it in a powerful position to dictate the characteristics of events or, indeed, even to change fundamental aspects of a sport (e.g. its rules). Sport's sovereignty over its own destiny has weakened. In essence, the media have come to play an increasingly influential part in both the construction and destruction of sporting structures and practices. The media have been influential in the genesis and development of new competitions, events and leagues. New sport forms have appeared and old ones have become marginalised. Rules have been changed and playing conditions revised so as to enhance media coverage. Even the clothes athletes wear and the equipment they use have come to reflect media-related interests. The colours and designs can add to the spectacle and the drama. Names on the players' kit help the viewer. Sponsors' logos proliferate. Opportunities to link media, sport and commerce are all too readily available. For example, the increasingly spectacular sports stadiums provide

backdrops 'wallpapered' with advertising hoardings. Sport has become more of a product that is manufactured, bought and sold. The sports organisations have gone along with this and, increasingly, have used agents and marketing companies to get their particular products into the media sport market place. Thus further complexity to the web of interdependencies that characterises media sport has been introduced. The media/sport production complex that has emerged today comprises the sports organisations, the media marketing organisations and the media personnel (Wenner, 1989).

Sometimes a sport jumps before it is pushed and, in a quest to make itself attractive as a media product, has been keen to introduce changes itself. Highly traditional aspects of the sporting experience disappear or are diluted. English football was once a Saturday afternoon ritual: today it has become almost a daily event as the television companies endeavour to fill their schedules and, importantly, maximise the return on the considerable sums they have invested in the game. Not only can the sporting day change, but so too can the season. English Rugby League, traditionally a winter sport, has now developed a seemingly made-for-television summer Super League characterised by a quest for entertainment and impact (Falcous, 1998). Clubs have changed their names (e.g. to the Bradford 'Bulls'), so as to enhance the spectacle and to offer potentially more commercial spin-offs. Rugby League in England has come under increasing competition for funding and exposure; the newly professional rugby union game has emerged as one notable threat. The media-inspired Super League has offered salvation, even though the trade-off has involved the loss of traditions and even the disappearance or downgrading of long-established and

famous clubs. There are numerous examples where sports with a record of limited or reducing attraction to media companies have tried to encourage interest. It is not always easy to establish the extent to which the push originated from the media companies. Night games and coloured clothing and many other changes in cricket, tighter 'figure hugging' clothing in a number of female sports (e.g. netball), and rule changes to speed up play (e.g. hockey), are just a few examples of sports trying to add to the glamour and spectacle and thus make them more marketable.

Specific timetabling changes in sports events have been made that are all too clearly about meeting the needs of the media. Events are sometimes held at times that would not appear to be in the best interests of the athletes involved, but which fit in with the viewing habits of the primarily North American television audience. Olympic or World Championship marathons run at the hottest time of the day and a number of high-profile heavyweight boxing championships in the early hours of the morning are cases in point. In the UK, football and rugby matches are not only played on non-traditional days, but lunchtime or early evening kick-offs have become part of the experience. Sports agree to such conditions so as to secure the best broadcasting fees. However, whether such decisions benefit the spectator or are consistent with the wellbeing of the athletes concerned is questionable. The commercial media gain much of their income from advertising, hence the introduction of more or longer breaks in sports events. North American sport, in so many ways the exemplar of the practical realisation of media influence, is characterised by action frequently and deliberately punctuated by the 'time-outs' or other breaks in proceedings. Association football has a '15-minute' halftime break

which apparently ends when the referee receives the signal that the TV advertising has been completed.

Another area of sports development particularly reflective of media involvement has been the growth in the 'big event'. The proliferation of high-profile and spectacular events, notably global championships and competitions (e.g. Rugby Union World Cup), has given the media access to larger and more varied audiences and hence greater potential in terms of recruiting advertisers. The media can also be seen as a central factor in the emergence of new sports (e.g. beach volleyball and beach football). Attention has also been focussed on the way in which media companies have attempted to extend the wider global diffusion of sports. The initiatives taken by a partnership of the NFL, its sponsors and media companies to make American football a global game are prime examples (Maguire, 1990). A somewhat less far-reaching but nevertheless revealing initiative has been the coverage of Japanese Sumo wrestling, which has appeared on European television schedules.

Sports, large and small, are vying for media attention, exposure and money but the experience of the media sport partnership is by no means the same for all of them.

### **Who are the winners and losers?**

The greater penetration of the media into the world of sport has had an impact on the relative status of particular sports and also on relationships within sports. Sports that are especially attractive to the media (e.g. football), have gained far greater status, exposure and economic wealth compared with other sports. The more glamorous football clubs in the Premier League, with

the wealth of their BSkyB/ITV contracts to support them, have been able to distance themselves from the rest of the clubs in England. The economic and political distance between sports and between clubs and leagues has widened. The media have helped fuel this in a direct sense by their patronage and contracts, but as sponsors and advertisers gravitate to the more glamorous and high-profile sports, events, leagues and clubs, so the differentials further increase. The introduction of media money and influence has also had an impact in pulling elite sport away from its roots. Elite sport, with its media-supported emphasis on spectacle, personalities and financial rewards, can become a somewhat alien activity for the recreational-level participant, who may have difficulty relating to it as the same sport.

The elite performers in a number of sports have become all too aware of their marketability as part of the media sport package and also of the vast amounts of media money that have flowed into sport. Aided by the emergence of agents working on their behalf, an increasing number of elite athletes have sought and obtained very high salaries or substantial prize money. This has further alienated athletes from the people who watch them on television and who read about them in the newspapers. Whilst all this media attention and money may raise the profile and status of elite athletes, this may also contribute to a more restricted life for them. They are now in the public eye and have become part of the media sport spectacle. Their degree of control over their own lives is brought into question. The media creates sporting personalities to help sell their programmes and newspapers and this involves athletes being media commodities in situations that can extend way beyond the direct sporting context.

Media sport is about a production process. As media intrusion into sport continues to grow, it becomes more important to delve more deeply into the actual nature of the media sport product, how it is developed and the objectives behind it. The particular ways in which the media structure, direct and influence the public's experience of sport and with what impact are now key concerns. They are more relevant when one considers the significant degree to which people now gain their sports knowledge and understanding through the media rather than through direct personal involvement in spectating and participation. As implied earlier, the media's objective in engaging with sport is based largely on the profit motive. For the government-supported media bodies there is the responsibility of providing a public service. The production process involves the media professionals using their knowledge and expertise to develop media sports products that reflect their ability and proficiency, and in doing so they are, in part, seeking to enhance their status and reputation, not least amongst their peers. These kinds of objectives impact on what is produced.

#### **THE MEDIA SPORT PRODUCT: CHARACTERISTICS, INFLUENCES AND OUTCOMES**

Much of what has been discussed has centred on sport's interrelationship with television and radio. The latter elements of the media are the ones injecting finance into sport and, increasingly, wishing to assume a greater degree of control. However, the media sports products on offer also include the printed word, the traditional mediated way that sports knowledge and understanding have been conveyed to the public at large. This section examines the specific nature of the



media sports product and what is influencing this. Therefore much of what is discussed reflects the activities of newspapers and other printed media as well as television and radio.

### Meanings and messages

Reference has been made to the higher profile of elite athletes and how the media have been instrumental in bringing this about. However, personality creation is only one of the ways in which the media influence and direct the sporting experience for their customers. This structuring of knowledge, messages and meanings inherent in media sport products has become an increasingly researched and significant area of interest (Lawrence and Rowe, 1986; McKay and Rowe, 1987; Sage, 1990; Whannel, 1992). It is a field of enquiry that encompasses interest in the ideological content of sports coverage and reporting and, in particular, how this reflects the dominant values and ideology prevalent in society. A principal focus is on the ways in which the media transmit the values and support the political and economic objectives of their owners and controllers. At a different level, there is the interest in the roles played by the media professionals and the nature and impact of their particular production codes and techniques on media sports products. In summary, the challenge is to examine the degree to which what the media audience is exposed not to a neutral and objective presentation of reality, but rather to a packaged representation and construction imbued with ideological content and reflective of the practical and professional interests of the production staff involved (Gruneau et al., 1988).

### Textual messages and meanings

Research into the textual messages contained in the media sport output of various

countries suggests the heavy influence of such ideological factors as capitalism, nationalism, patriarchy and racism (Gruneau, 1989b; Whannel, 1992; Sage, 1990). Each of these factors may reflect the ideological biases evident within the ownership and control of the increasingly dominant multinational media companies and, indeed, the dominant values in a particular society.

### Capitalism

Media sport is an area of endeavour where capitalist virtues can come to the fore, not least in the prevalence of the profit motive (Lawrence and Rowe, 1986, McKay and Rowe, 1987). The media, a key cultural industry and so much a symbol and vehicle of capitalist interests, have become, through sports pages and programming, a source of support for ownership values and priorities. Media's implicit and explicit support for the dominance of monopoly capitalism has contributed to the resilience of capitalism in society and for the status quo in the way society is stratified. The inculcation and acceptance of the desired characteristics of the 'workplace' are fostered. The value of hard work and the spirit of free enterprise are characteristics to be found in sport that the media may choose to emphasise and describe in noticeably positive terms. An adherence to the work ethic is deemed worthy of particular praise. Core sporting characteristics such as competitiveness and teamwork are highlighted. An athlete's power, aggression and competitiveness are applauded. The Olympic motto, *Citius, Altius, Fortius*, emphasises the challenge of getting 'Faster, Higher and Stronger'. It is not surprising therefore that sport, particularly as it has become increasingly commercialised, has been seen by the media ownership as a site

for promulgating capitalist values and interests. The USA can be portrayed as the leader in promoting the role and importance of capitalism. It is also a world leader in media sport. Bring these factors together and it is clear why the Americanisation tendencies found in media sport production can be highlighted and explained in terms of monopoly capitalist domination. American media sport glorifies organisation and leadership. The qualities and ambitions inherent in the Olympic motto are particularly evident in US media and sport. There is also the fascination with sporting statistics to back up such interests.

#### *Nationalism*

Sociological research has highlighted the significance of media sport as a site for nationalistic fervour and national stereotyping (Maguire, 1999; Rowe et al., 1998). Nationalities can be promoted or put down. The home country's athletes and teams are portrayed as heroes and their opposition as the villains of the piece. Sporting events can be used a vehicle for calling for unity within a nation and for a show of allegiance. Media-led national and local campaigns can be established to encourage the public to rally to the cause. Heightened emotional attachment can sell newspapers and recruit viewers and listeners. Nostalgic memories of past triumphs can be evoked as a way of 'rallying the troops'. Whilst victories of a sporting nature (e.g. the, 1966 England football World Cup success), can be revisited by the media, it is not unusual for audiences to be reminded of events of a non-sporting nature. For example, during the Euro '96 Football Championship held in England, the British media drew attention to the Spanish Armada and the Second World War as part of the build-up to the

host countries' matches against Spain and Germany respectively (Maguire and Poulton, 1999). Newspaper coverage of events can involve the use of photographs and headlines to underline the stances being taken. A proliferation of national flags and colours on the sports pages (and even front pages) and emotive banner headlines may serve to direct the reader's interest and enthusiasm. These kinds of media devices can be used extensively in the coverage of events. Story lines strongly reflective of nationalist interests are developed and presented.

#### *Patriarchy*

Gender bias and inequality are evident in both sport and media. It is not unexpected therefore that patriarchy is a characteristic of sport media products. It is an area that has come under close and extensive scrutiny (see, for example, Birrell and Cole, 1994; Duncan and Hasbrook, 1988; Eastman and Billings, 2000; Theberge, 1989; Williams et al., 1986). Media sport ownership and production are male dominated; sport and media sport are important aspects of culture which help to underpin male hegemony in society (Birrell and Theberge, 1994). Of particular attention to researchers has been the way in which the media disregard and marginalise women's sport (Daddario, 1994). Female athletes and sports get little coverage in the media relative to their male counterparts. It is rare to find newspaper column inches and photographs allocated to women's sport. Few female sports are to be found in television schedules and those that are tend to be given a low profile.

Not only is the quantity of the media coverage of women's sport highly limited, but its form and quality have also to be questioned. The media are seen to stereotype,

trivialise and sexualise female athletes (Duncan, 1990; Duquin, 1989; MacNeil, 1988). Sportswomen are either put down as not fitting male perceptions of appropriate femininity or they are glamorised. Attention has been drawn to photographic approaches that highlight and emphasise the physical characteristics and attractiveness of some female athletes. The narrative that is attached to the media output is of a similar nature, often with sporting prowess disregarded or played down. There are fewer high-profile female athletes, a fact reflective of the low media attention paid to women's sport in general. Those that do exist usually correspond to stereotypical images which frequently view sporting ability as a seemingly secondary consideration. An example is the extensive media coverage afforded to the Russian tennis player, Anna Kournikova: media interest has focused primarily on her physical attributes rather than her prowess on court.

The connection between gender in media sport extends beyond the treatment of female sport and athletes. There is the interest in how the media report male sport. This can encompass a concern with the treatment of violence in sport (Young and Smith, 1989) and the imagery associated with male bodies and masculinity (Trujillo, 1995; Messner et al., 2000).

### *Racism*

The ownership control of the major global media institutions is dominated by white males. National media reflect dominant racial and ethnic interests (Tudor, 1998). The background, values and practices of the professionals working in the media and in sport are usually consistent with such concerns. The consequence of all these factors

is that the sporting achievements of certain groups can either be celebrated or played down in the sports media. In a similar fashion to gender, stereotyping based on racial or ethnic lines may also be evident (Davis and Harris, 1998). For example, black male athletes may well be applauded in the media for their aggression and physicality whilst their hard work and intelligence are disregarded. In contrast, it is the latter attributes that the media assign to the white athletes. On television the performance of black athletes is frequently linked to such stereotypical attributes as natural ability and tactical naïvety (Whannel, 1992: 129). Racism in the media can also be seen to reflect a kind of nationalistic prioritisation. International success by black British athletes can get played down in comparison to similar successes achieved by their white counterparts.

The above kinds of ideological influences are important considerations when examining media sport but so too are the particular professional approaches of the people who actually put together the programmes and newspapers.

### **The media professionals**

The media professionals (e.g. producers, directors, commentators, reporters and cameramen) exist to produce a media sports package that aims to attract, interest and excite their audience. They work in a particularly competitive working environment. The emphasis is on making the product attractive and to this end it is sometimes difficult to establish where the sport starts and the media event ends. Selling a televised sports programme is the paramount concern. Often sport is sold as 'showbiz' with similar characteristics to the Hollywood

'thriller' or the weekly 'soap opera'. It not surprising that what emerges is a distorted and packaged representation of reality rather than a neutral, objective and natural presentation. Neutrality is clearly a debatable point, as the evidence of the ideological content referred to above illustrates. The various professionals working in television and radio attempt to naturalise events for their audience. They bring to bear the skills and technical developments. They endeavour to provide atmosphere and to encourage a feeling of attachment to what is happening. They present the event as being an experience of reality. The media companies may bill sporting programmes as providing a 'ringside seat', but in many ways nothing could be further from the truth. So much is missed by not being present at the event and so much is added by the media professionals. Not all your senses are brought to bear. The media sports experience is not the same as being there live at the event.

Sociological research has suggested a number of key characteristics of the media sports product (Gruneau, 1989a; McKay and Rowe, 1987; Whannel, 1992). Each of these characteristics reflects the way in which media professionals work to a series of codes, conventions, assumptions and approaches. The outcome is to move the audience away from a sporting and towards a media experience. The media interpret happenings and provide their audience with explanations and meanings. They structure our knowledge and understanding for us. What is offered is not inevitable. Decisions are taken for the audience; you are directed what to see and read and how to make sense of it. The media professionals construct and frame the sport experience their audience. The pre-event advertising

and build-up, the nature of the presentation and its placement in the programming schedules help to provide the audience with information and points of reference to help explain what is going to happen and why it is significant. There is often harking back to previous events that are deemed to have a bearing on what is about to take place. Statistics and other historical material are presented to contextualise what is about to happen.

### **Media sport production**

The ways in which meanings and messages are organised and influenced are reflected in the narrative, audio-visual and technical and presentational/packaging aspects and objectives of the media sports product. The media personnel involved are the commentators and reporters, photographers, camera operators, sound technicians, producers, editors and directors. These production aspects and individuals are central to what is, in essence, a process of event construction undertaken by the media. Increasingly, media sports programmes are being developed with the following important characteristics to the fore.

There is, first, a growing emphasis on *spectacularisation* (Gruneau, 1989a; Sewart, 1987). Reference has already been made to the growth of the big global sporting occasions. These offer opportunities to add variety, colour and impact, to enhance the entertainment element and to provide a wealth of material for the 'big build-up' to the event. The Olympics have gone far beyond the status of a sports event. The opening ceremonies have become spectacles tailor-made for the medium of global television.

### **Box 10.1 The choreography of the opening of an Olympics: a made-for-television spectacular**

Spectacular stadiums and locations. A confined and defined space. Colour, banners and flags. Parades of athletes. Dancers and music. Nationalism and internationalism. Youthfulness. Oaths and speeches. Nostalgia and vision. Symbolism: a release of doves (peace), the entrance of the Olympic Torch and the lighting of the flame.

A second powerful characteristic of media sport production is that of *dramatisation*. The media professionals set up story lines around the sporting event and the individuals involved. They work to script the event so as to excite. They provide pre-event discussion and analysis. The audience's appetite and anticipation are heightened by the extent and form of the build-up that the media provides. The media endeavour to create or home in on tension, emotion and incidents. Suspense, conflict and confrontation are emphasised so as to add to the dramatic effect. Event creation has already been discussed but the media may go further than just helping in the establishment of a particular competition or the development of new sport; they may create happenings within events. For example, a head-to-head encounter between the top two track and field athletes from a particular discipline can provide the drama and personalisation on which the media thrive. Television and radio seek to heighten the dramatic impact by offering the audience a sense of immediacy. The television sport presentation aims to provide that ringside seat mentioned earlier. The media claim to get their audience as close as possible to the action: replays, camera angles and interviews are employed to enhance this effect. Stump cameras in cricket coverage get you close to action. You too can see what it is like to face the bowling! Athletes today face a barrage of cameras

and microphones the moment their event/match is over. Cameras are now even going into changing rooms.

A third aspect of media construction is the process of *personalisation* that is undertaken. Individual sportspeople are highlighted, built up and examined, often in great detail. Media sport superstars are born. Post-event/match press conferences are now a fact of life for many athletes. Both sporting and non-sporting lives come under the media microscope. Great deeds or misdemeanours of the past are resurrected and inspected. The audience is encouraged to associate with and warm to an individual. Alternatively they may be asked to view an individual in less than favourable terms. Heroes and villains are created. Interpersonal rivalries are highlighted, indeed invented by the media. The media's obsession with the relationship between Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett is a classic example (Whannel, 1992: 140–8). An interesting example from British media sport is the footballer, Vinnie Jones, labelled by the media as a 'hard man' characterised by his uncompromising way of playing. Reference was frequently made to his past offences and colourful disciplinary record. Ironically and perhaps revealingly, Vinnie was later to find stardom as a stereotypical villain and 'hard man' in another media form, that of films.

Often criticised but much in evidence in the construction of media sport production

is the use of expert analysis. The wise head with the penetrating insights to aid the lead commentator and the panel of experts to tell us what is going and why have now become the norm in so many sports presentations. Love them or hate them, these individuals (usually former players or managers/coaches) are there to take a role in educating the members of the audience, directing them to the salient aspects of what is about to or has happened and, importantly, to structure and influence their opinions.

These various media sport construction characteristics are reinforced and enabled by the actual technical conventions and devices employed in the media world. In newspapers, sports reporting is developed and enhanced through the skills of the editors, headline writers and photo-journalists. Sports reporting lends itself to the emotive and 'catchy' headline and to the dramatic or heart-rending photograph. Often a picture can send a stronger message than words. In television, the programme director is central to making the most of the media opportunities available. They are aided in this task by skilled camera and sound work. A camera angle obtained and then selected by the director can add to the spectacle and drama of the occasion. Event location can help: the coverage of swimming events at the Barcelona Olympics in, 1992 will long be remembered for the spectacular backdrop of the city. Similarly sound – imported or at the actual event – can be used to direct the attention and interest of the audience.

### THE MEDIA SPORT AUDIENCE

A major question surrounding media sport is the role played by the audience. Are they knowledgeable about the media sport product

to which they are exposed. Are they able to make informed choices about what they see, hear and read? One viewpoint maintains that the audience does exercise free choice and is essentially receiving the sports media products that they want. Their wishes are reflected in the output from the media companies and the professionals who work for them. The media are viewed as neutral and pluralist, reflecting the diversity in their audience and respecting the sovereignty of their consumers. A contrary viewpoint sees the media sport audience as one lacking in knowledge and experience.

Despite physical improvements in the many sports venues and the attempts by sports organisations to make the 'live' experience a pleasurable and exciting one, for an increasing number of people, their experience of elite sport is solely through the media. The 'couch spectator' has before them a wealth of media sports products to choose from, together with a growing array of gadgetry to make the involvement more interesting and personal. Interactive television, with the ability to choose highlights, to select camera angles and to have facts and figures at the press of a button, is promoted as superior to being present at the event. It can be argued that one aspect of the changing nature of this engagement with sport is a reduction in first-hand knowledge of what actual goes on at the 'live' event. The sporting knowledge-base of the audience is therefore reduced and thus renders them more susceptible to the interpretations provided by the media.

### MEDIA SPORT: WHERE TO NOW?

The media set fashions but are also influenced by wider social change. They are conscious of the importance of keeping their viewers, listeners and readership. Ratings

and sales and linked advertising revenues are crucial and are monitored carefully. Sport, by engaging with the media, has increasingly linked itself with what is a volatile industry built powerfully on the profit motive. It is also a highly competitive industry with media sport broadcasting rights a sensitive and significant battleground. Media commitment to sport, and more particularly to certain sports or events, can change, leaving an ever more dependent world of sport vulnerable to instability. How elite commercialised sport continues to operate in such an environment will be of particular interest. Further far-reaching changes in some sports and in some events may result. Will the line between what counts as sport entertainment and what counts as media entertainment become even more blurred? The initial inroads made by media companies into direct ownership of sport may well be extended. This would fundamentally alter the balance of power within the media sport partnership and enhance the likelihood of a growth in 'made-for-television' sport. Is the rise to prominence of WWF wrestling the shape of things to come?

Developments in the forms and technical aspects of media, principally the use of the

Internet, may have a profound effect on media sport production. This is yet another unknown factor to take into account. New players in what will become an increasingly global media sport marketplace, perhaps more specialised media sports companies, may further enhance the money flowing into sport, but will the patterning still remain in terms of which sports benefit and which do not? The extension of 'pay-to-view' ways of marketing and receiving media sports products is highly likely and therefore, the issues of access and equity are unlikely to disappear in the short term. How the media sport audience reacts to these kinds of developments will be vital. The media live or die on the success or not of their ratings or circulation. Will media sport still retain massive audiences in the years ahead or will the public discover participation and 'live' spectating to be far more satisfying? In doing so, will the audience come to recognise that what they have been receiving as media sport has moved too far away from what sport should be about? Inevitably the answers lie in the capacity of the public to influence their own media usage habits and the ability of the media, in all its forms, to keep its audiences contented with what is offered.

### Chapter summary

- Sport and the media have both a global and a local scope of operation and are bound together in a complex network of relationships.
- Since the 1980s the value of sport to media companies and their investment in sport have grown dramatically.
- The power of the small number of major media companies raises important issues of access and equity, especially with the growth of pay-to-view sports events.
- While the media have demonstrated a considerable capacity to influence the character and development of sport, it should be noted that there is little evidence of resistance to commodification from sports bodies or athletes.

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- Sports media generally promote and reinforce a distinctive set of values associated with capitalism, nationalism, patriarchy and racism.
- The media production process emphasises spectacle, drama and personalisation.

### Further reading

Wenner's edited volume (1998), Gruneau et al. (1988) and Rowe (1999) provide sound general introductions to the field. Birrell and Cole (1994) and Daddario (1994) explore the relationship between media and gender. Davis and Harris (1998) and Tudor (1998) explore the interrelationship between the media and race and ethnicity, and Rowe et al. (1998) examine the impact of the media on sport and nationalism. As regards the role of the media in relation to particular sports, Maguire (1990) offers an analysis of the role of the media in the promotion of American football in Britain and Lawrence and Rowe (1986) provide a similar analysis of cricket. Finally, Young and Smith (1989) and Theberge (1989) explore the treatment of violence in sport by the media.

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