Examining Nationalism During the Commonwealth Games: An Analysis of Australian Broadcast Commentary During the 2018 Commonwealth Games

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In the context of international sporting contests, which typically attract great interest globally, the coverage of these events helps to define, influence, and sometimes reflect mainstream beliefs. Although media consumers have no influence over how stories are framed, editors and journalists can construct their narratives and stories to attract, maintain, and foster continued media consumption (Scott, Zakus, & Hill, 2014; Vincent & Crossman, 2012). With thousands of hours of competition occurring often simultaneously over the course of 11 days, viewers only witness mere slices of the Commonwealth Games, local networks must decide which events will be viewed by the highest number of viewers in each nation. Broadcasters often broadcast a nationalized telecast to meet their, often, capitalistic goals. In Australia, the Seven Network is the official free-to-air broadcaster of the 2018 Commonwealth Games that will be held on the Gold Coast in Australia.

To date, much of the scholarship around the understanding of sporting broadcasts from a nationalistic lens has had it focus on the Olympic Games, ranging from the United States (Angelini et al., 2012), to Australia (Rowe et al., 2010, Xu et al., 2017), to China (Billings et al., 2011), to Canada (Angelini et al., 2015), and beyond. Other global mega-events have also been studied, such as the FIFA World Cup and Rugby World Cup (Devlin, Billings & Brown, 2017, Scott, Billings, Harris, & Vincent, 2017). However, there is a lack of understanding in how the Commonwealth Games’ narrative plays out in the nations that participate in these games, which were formerly known as the British Empire Games. The Commonwealth Games are a multi-sport event that features over 70 participating nations competing in over 250 events in 17 sports and typically has over 4500 participating athletes (Commonwealth Games Federation, 2014). It is an event that takes place every four years and started in 1930. As a nation, Australia has been greatly successful at the Commonwealth Games with this nation leading both the gold medal tally and overall medal count. Thus, expectations for Australian success at the 2018 Commonwealth Games are high.

Prior studies (e.g., Chalip, 1992; Chalip, Green, & Vander Velden, 2000; Eagleman, Burch, & Vooris, 2014; Scott & Kunkel, 2016) have explored the content of the Olympic Games from multiple perspectives, ranging from the storylines embedded into the coverage to gender, race, and ethnicity. However, a primary focus has involved the role of nationalism - particularly the degree of focus on a nation’s “home” team as opposed to Olympians from other nations. Real (1989) offered a nationalism index, based on the principle that all nations prioritize their home athletes, but do so in varying degrees. Billings, Angelini, and Wu (2011) found this to be the case in both the United States and China and Ličen and Billings (2013) conducted similar analyses from a nationalized perspective within Slovenia. However, while the Olympics in an Australian context has received some focus in studies (e.g., Eagleman et al., 2014; Knight, MacNeill, & Donnelly, 2005; Scott & Kunkel, 2016; Toohey, 1997, Xu, Billings, Scott, Lewis, & Sharpe, 2017), no quantitative content analysis has explored the Australian rendering of the Commonwealth Games in terms of clock-time, salience, and descriptive renderings; a significant void given the prominence of Australia in terms of medal winnings, sporting culture, and its role as a prior host.

Focusing on the Australian Commonwealth Games telecast through a nationalized perspective could be particularly insightful, as many have argued it is among the most home-nation focused of all Olympic media. So understanding if the Australian telecasts of the Commonwealth Games is as nationalistic as its reputation around Olympic telecasts will help to expand knowledge around the portrayal of nationality during mega-events. Former U.S.-based NBC President of Sport and Olympics Dick Ebersol once referenced Australia to argue that “they will put a camera on
one of their swimmers who’s not going to finish any better than fifth. We would never do that in a million years” (in Billings, 2008, p. 43). Thus, this study focuses on the role of nationalized focus in the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games as conveyed through Australia’s Seven Network’s main channel. Through focusing on quantitative measures of clock-time, salience, and description, important insights can be ascertained as to the nature of home vs. “other” distinctions within Australian Commonwealth Games media content.

Informed by framing theory, this study will investigate how the Seven Network in Australia broadcasted the Commonwealth Games. Framing occurs as the media actively select certain aspects of an issue to report, affecting the understanding of the message people receive (Entman, 2007). Framing studies (i.e. Billings, 2008; Li, Stokowski, Dittmore, & Scott, 2016; Maguire, 2005; Scott & Kunkel, 2016) have often found that the media will feature more of the “home” nation than all other nations in order to capture and build audiences during globally important sporting events.

All of the prime-time broadcast hours of the Seven Network’s main channel will be analyzed during the 11 days of the Commonwealth Games, which will be held from 4 to 15 April 2018. The prime-time telecasts of the coverage will be analyzed as these events tend to have the highest ratings and hold the highest potential for impact on nationalism. Only comments spoken by network-employed individuals will be analyzed for descriptors and mentions of athlete names because this dialogue can be largely scripted and supervised by Seven Network editors and producers (see Billings, 2007). Those network employees included host commentators, on-site reporters, special assignment reporters, color commentators, and all play-by-play announcers for both individual and team sports. The unit of analysis will be the verbal descriptor used by announcers, including all adjectives, adjectival phrases, adverbs, and adverbial phrases spoken by Seven Network employees. All descriptors were coded for (a) the sex of the athlete (man or woman), (b) the ethnicity of the athlete (Asian, Black, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, White, or other), (c) the nationality of the athlete (Australian or non-Australian), (d) the athlete’s sport, and (e) the word-for-word descriptive phrase. The Billings and Eastman (2003) taxonomy, later advanced in Billings et al. (2008), was then used to classify all the descriptors coded. Based on this taxonomy used, the commentary was divided into three categories: (a) attributions of success or failure in the athlete’s performance, (b) depictions of an athlete’s personality or physicality, including those external variables that are not attributable to the athlete’s performance, and (c) neutral comments, which often include play-by-play dialogue.

Results of this study will help to inform whether there are differences in the amount and type of commentary used by the Seven Network during an important mega-event on Australia’s sporting calendar. Further, no quantitative content analysis has explored the Australian rendering of the Commonwealth Games in terms of clock-time, salience, and descriptive renderings; a significant void given the prominence of Australia in terms of medal winnings, sporting culture, and its role as a prior host of the Commonwealth Games. Results of this study will be presented at the 2018 NASSM conference in Halifax, Canada.