‘Drug Cheat or a Jerk?: A Comparative Analysis of Framing Athletes’ Conflicts in Australian and Chinese Media

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Communication - Media (Olympic Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2018-205

Friday, June 8, 2018
1:20 PM
Room: Acadia C

International sporting competitions have been a source of public interest and often serve as an expression of national identity (Allison, 2004; Cronin, 1999; Maguire & Tuck, 2005). The Olympic Games have often been the site for study to understand how the media portray patriotism (Vincent & Hill, 2013) and nationalistic biases existing in media coverage (i.e. Billing & Eastman, 2002; Larson & Rivenburgh, 1991; Li, Stokowski, Dittmore, Scott, 2016; Xu, Billings, Scott, Lewis, & Sharpe, 2017). During the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, one controversy attracted global media attention, which was the conflict between two swimmers: Australian Mack Horton and Chinese Sun Yang. After winning the men’s 400-meter freestyle final, Horton described his victory as a ‘win for the good guys’, and labelled the rivalry with Sun as a match between him and ‘an athlete who has tested positive’ (ESPN.com, 2016). Horton’s remarks referred to Sun’s doping scandal in 2014 when the Chinese star served a three-month ban after failing a doping test.

Horton’s comments immediately initiated debate in both Australia and China. Media in both nations continued to report on the conflicts between two athletes, two teams, and even two nations. Millions of Chinese consumers felt offended by Horton’s comments and attacked the Australian on his social media accounts (Tatlow, 2016). Some journalists mentioned that the conflict of two athletes may have impacted negatively on civil relations between residents in the two nations (Tatlow, 2016).

Doping, controversies, and scandals often draw considerable media attention during the Olympic Games. When the media cover a doping scandal, they may connect it with a country’s national identity (Laine, 2006). However, Denham (2004) found that media from the athlete’s nation were more likely to justify the athlete’s behavior and defend for the athlete compared to other countries’ media. Although prior literature has addressed the relationship between sport and national identity in many different nations, such as the United States (Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999), China (Li et al., 2016), and the UK (Vincent et al, 2010), there is limited scholarship to understand how the same controversy is portrayed in different countries (Bie & Billings, 2014). Informed by framing theory (Goffman, 1975), this study aims to investigate how Australian and Chinese media reported the Sun-Horton conflict during the 2016 Olympic Games.

Framing theory is used to explain the influence of the media and the ways it presents a story that facilitates how readers or viewers interpret or decode the story (Goffman, 1974). Framing occurs when a media member selects certain aspects of an issue to report, which may influence how a consumer perceives the message (Entman, 2007). These information selections often are at the exclusion of other aspects of the same story or theme. Therefore, a consumer’s perception toward a story can be potentially influenced and even shaped by the media.

To compare the news coverage of the Sun-Horton conflict in Australian and Chinese media, a total of 336 news articles (161 from Australian media and 165 from Chinese media) were collected for the analysis. The sampling period was from August 8, 2016 - the date when Horton verbally attacked Sun - to August 16, 2016 - the third day after the last day of Olympic swimming competition. Only articles matching ‘published as a hard-news story, an opinion column, or a staff editorial’ (Denham, 2004, p.173) were included in the analysis. Incidental mentions, letters to editor, event schedules, and advertisements were excluded from the analysis.

Quantitative content analysis was the primary method used to gain insight into how mainstream Chinese and Australian media covered this conflict. Content analysis is a systematic approach used to study messages in media addressing inferences in communication (Budd, Thorp, & Donohew, 1967). In this study, content included both
articles and headlines and were systemically categorized and coded. All selected media were categorized based on type of media (newspaper, online newspaper, national news agency, or commercial websites) and scope of media (national media, regional media, local media).

To construct the code book, a pilot study was conducted. Coders randomly selected 21 news articles from Chinese media and 20 articles from Australian media. The results of the pilot study revealed that two main issues have been covered in Australian and Chinese media. The first issue was about the legitimacy of Sun Yang’s right to participate to the Olympic Games after failing a doping test. The three themes developed from the analysis of Australian media were: 1) Horton labelling Sun as a drug cheat; 2) doping has no place in sports and athletes should be banned for life for first offence; and 3) lack of faith in the IOC and FINA in the fight against doping. Three main themes developed from Chinese media were: 1) Sun is a hard-working champion, and had no intention to use PED; 2) Australian swimmers also had doping issues; 3) Chinese fans and other athletes are supporting Sun in this issue.

The second issue that was covered in both Australian and Chinese media was whether it was appropriate for Horton to comment on his opponent during the Olympic Games. Themes developed from Australian media included 1) Horton is brave to comment about this issue and is an inspiration to others in standing up against doping; and 2) Horton has rights of freedom of speech. Themes merged from Chinese media included: 1) Horton’s comments were mean, nasty and shameless, and disobeyed sportsmanship; and 2) what Horton has done will hurt civil relationships between Australia and China.

The codebook will be analyzed in the following areas. First, each article was coded based on whether reporters were framing Sun Yang and Mark Horton in this conflict. If yes, the tone applied to the coverage was rated on a five-point scale (Diefenbach, 1997), in which 1 = negative/skeptical; 2 = somewhat negative/skeptical; 3 = neutral; 4 = somewhat positive/defending; 5 = positive/defending. The same approach was also used to study the headline of each article. Secondly, each article was coded based on whether it mentioned (1 = yes, 2 = no) Sun Yang’s doping scandal and Chinese swimming’s doping history. Third, each article was coded for whether it mentioned (1 = yes, 2 = no) Australian’s doping history and poor performance at the 2012 Olympic Games. Lastly, each article was coded for whether media mentioned (1 = yes, 2 = no) the importance of freedom of speech.

In order to enhance trustworthiness and reduce bias, intercoder reliability was introduced in this study (Creswell, 2015). Two native Chinese researchers and three Australian researchers were involved in the coding process. Even though this study currently is still in progress, results will help to inform how Chinese and Australian media covered an international conflict between athletes. Further, this study will help push forward the practical understanding of how sports media used narratives to frame the ‘us versus them’ plotline. The results will suggest that sport sometimes is no longer merely a sport itself, and it may become a metaphor for hostile nationalized ideologies after being covered by media (Bie & Billings, 2014). Results of this study will be presented at the 2018 NASSM conference in Halifax, Canada.