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Examining Identity in Sports Media

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In his 2006 best seller, *The Long Tail*, *Wired* magazine editor Chris Anderson argues that niche consumption is en vogue within virtually every form of mass media. Gone are the days of water cooler programming in which shows like *Friends* and *Seinfeld* secured substantial swaths of television viewers; in their place we have shows with “buzz” that secure less than half the viewers that the top sitcoms once did, along with hundreds of cable channels that draw viewers by the thousands rather than millions. Music enthusiasts are less likely to listen to Top 40 music radio stations than they are to take advantage of the thousands of options specifically tailored to their tastes, e.g., downloading obscure, non-commercial music a dollar at a time. The cinema still has blockbusters, but it also features independent “art house” options that grow each year. Yet, within all of the niche markets that define 21st

century media, sport permeates immense segments of American and international culture. The Super Bowl continues to be the largest single television rating of a given year, and competition between satellite radio and television companies is often largely won and lost based on who can secure the most desirable sports contracts. Certainly, this century has given rise to niche programming—such as the X Games or Ultimate Fighting Championship—yet these new events only supplement the still-uber-popular cornerstone sports within the sports cultural zeitgeist. For instance, even with all of baseball's troubles, more people are attending the games than at any point in the long history of the game (Selig, 2007).

Dubbing major sports media events as “megasport” (those events that become part of a national fabric, such as the Indianapolis 500 on Memorial Day weekend or March Madness every spring), Eastman, Newton, and Pack (1996) explore the ramifications of an evermore-pervasive sporting landscape in which millions (sometimes billions) of people experience a joint “reality” through the lens of an often singular mass media outlet. Such events represent a mosaic of political, social, and cultural import, offering commentary on issues beyond the directly observable athletic performances. For decades, scholars have devoted considerable attention and scrutiny to the exploration of identity, particularly interrogating how mediasport (see Wenner, 2006) enacts and portrays social divides and underprivileged groups. Conclusions, of course, vary—ranging from arguments that sport (and the media surrounding it) contributes to and even exacerbates identity divisions to studies that argue sport can enact social changes that aid the advancement of underprivileged and underrepresented groups within society.

❖ NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN SPORTS MEDIA

The examination of identity has a difficult and often convoluted history within academe at least partly because of its hybrid localization in scholarship. Scholars in disciplines from sociology to women's studies to global studies all rightly focus some of their works in this area. Disciplines such as kinesiology and sports management examine identity issues as well, partly because of the underlying belief that sport shapes society as much as society shapes sport, but also because many sporting entities routinely resist more progressive thinking about identity issues, making the organizations (and the individuals involved in them) ripe for examination (see Maguire, 1999, for an overview of identity in sport on a global scale).

However, it is hard to separate the negotiation of identity from how it is conveyed and shaped by media entities, and it is equally as difficult to separate media influence from the core communication messages employed by these same sports media. Thus, communication research can often be referred to as “Ground Zero” for understanding the complex messages that mediasport imparts. This book aims to provide some common understanding of the specific communicative messages embedded in media coverage while also serving as a bridge to the understanding of other disciplines that study identity and sport from sociological and psychological standpoints.

Stuart Hall (1996) claims that “identities are constructed within, not outside discourse” (p. 4); as such, these identities are duplicitous, ubiquitous, and continually in flux. These issues are important sources for learning and reinforcing social beliefs as they are salient contexts for investigating issues of identity, including ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability/disability, and more. Consequently, sport and media inscribe numerous implicit and explicit ideologies that saturate our culture. Using a wide variety of theoretical and methodological constructs (e.g., surveys, content analyses, ethnographic research, field work, or other appropriate quantitative, qualitative, or rhetorical approaches), this edited collection examines various media to expose how the intersection of sport and media construct, reinforce, and/or perpetuate perceptions of human identities. Morris (2006) articulates the societal shaping of identity issues, using anecdotes to explain how people conceive their perception of identity—both in terms of self and otherness. The amount of media scholarship on identity tends to coordinate with the degree in which the identity form is directly observable. For instance, gender is relatively easy to note (and, hence, code, study, and analyze), while the sexuality of a person is obviously not as easily determined unless it is overtly articulated. Additionally, some discussions of identity are more ubiquitous than others. Jon Entine’s (2000) examination of race, *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We’re Afraid to Talk About It*, illustrates how issues of race and ethnicity permeate virtually any participant or consumer of sports media. In contrast, an identity issue such as (dis)ability only percolated in discussion after golfer Casey Martin sued the PGA Tour in his desire to use a golf cart at tournaments (Cherney, 2003). Otherwise this discussion of identity is primarily nonexistent in research making assumptions that sport and ability coalesce as a naturalized construct.

Scholars have a pragmatic tendency for isolating identity variables, particularly those that can be most readily recognized. As Kelby Halone mentions in Chapter 12, merely examining six identity

variables (hardly an exhaustive list) amounts to over one thousand cells of potential examination. Thus, some scholars (e.g., Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings & Eastman, 2002, 2003) have attempted to provide foundational analyses of gender, ethnicity, and nationality as singular variables that later can be amalgamated, while other scholars (e.g. Billings, Angelini, & Eastman, 2008; Boyd, 1997; Hauck, 2006) focus on the complex intermingled roles of identity within singular sports case studies. Both approaches are useful if not foundational to the more complex understanding of identity that must be addressed in the 21st century.

Identity politics (see Mohanty, Alcoff, Hames-Garcia, & Moya, 2005; Nicholson & Seidman, 1996), which first became part of the public consciousness in the 1970s, was largely an attempt to offer increased opportunities for inequities provided for certain underprivileged, underrepresented, or underutilized groups of people, most commonly in terms of racial and gender biases as a response to the civil rights movement and second-wave feminism. Such conceptions have expanded both in terms of scope and goal orientation over the subsequent decades, noting that hegemony entrenches notions of difference depending on cultural, social, and political contexts and understandings. Most notably, identity has been more self-denoted, suggesting a negotiation of who a group self-identifies as belonging. Recently, scholars (Hogg & Reid, 2006) have combined postulations of social identity (Tajfel, 1972; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and self-categorization (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Riecher, & Wetherell, 1987) to argue that group “norms” are conceived through the negotiation of these issues.

Social norming provides the impetus for examining not only media content and effects as they relate to identity but also the inherent tie to mediasport (Wenner, 2006), as sports are consumed by millions of television viewers, radio audiences, newspaper readers, magazine subscribers, and Internet users. For instance, the two largest world television spectacles (Olympics and World Cup) draw global audiences in the billions (Gordon & Sibson, 1998; IOC Marketing Fact File, 2008), numbers that dwarf the ratings of perceived American mega-programs such as *American Idol*, which attracts nearly 28 million weekly regular viewers (Robertson, 2008).

Because of the ubiquitous nature of mediasport, the opportunity also exists for billions of people to be exposed to new cultures, ideas, and social perceptions that are inherently linked with beliefs about identity including gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, aging, religion, and many other ways in which a person self-identifies. Sometimes this exposure comes in the form of witnessing a race competition in

which people rarely interact within their local communities (take, for instance, a person growing up in a small, monolithically White U.S. town who also is a fan of professional basketball); at other times exposure consists of new conceptions of identity groups in which they already interact (take for instance a Middle Eastern perspective on Olympic beach volleyball “uniforms” and their relation to women’s issues). The direct effects, i.e., the hypodermic needle, approach to media is certainly not being endorsed here; however, it is also not such a logical leap to believe that people who follow national and international sports in the media also are (re)formulating their own beliefs about identity groups: the grand “negotiation” in which we refer that is perpetually in flux and constantly updated based on personal experiences.

❖ SCHOLARSHIP ON IDENTITY

This book explores issues of identity within mediasport—conceptions of gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, (dis)ability, etc.—without the use of dichotomous value-laden notions of good/bad or right/wrong. The chapters within the book utilize a wide variation of theoretical constructs and methodological approaches, examining one or more issues of identity and analyzing how mediasport holds the power to shade our judgments about people. We contend that identity is an extensive negotiation that is always changing, always being interpreted and reinterpreted, and always contested by various entities. Whether the context of the mediated situation is a movie, television program, series of newspaper commentaries, or other mass media formats, the negotiation of identity can be addressed using different epistemological approaches with the underlying theme being that social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) can be influenced by the way mediasport frames or sets an agenda (see Goffman, 1974; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Notions of identity are intermingled and interminably complex to the point that many media gatekeepers have indicated they let the visual image do the work (see Billings, 2008). As a result, gender identity is reduced to biological differences (such as breasts or an Adam’s apple) and reinforced with social constructions (wearing makeup, long hair, and gender-based clothing) as evidenced in visual cues; ethnicity is typically reduced to perceived skin pigment; and sexual orientation is left to a viewer’s increasingly flawed conceptions of “gaydar,” based on stereotypes of effeminate men or masculine women. This book delves into many of these issues with fervor and a sense of detail that is necessary to gain even a rudimentary understanding of what

constitutes self or otherness. Without question, our examination of identity variables is not exhaustive but only scratches the surface on what should be a dense dialogue about how sport, media, and identity triangulate a unique nexus of investigation that shapes everyday actions and understandings.

Many studies of identity have functioned as “scrutinizations” of social divides, essentially determining ways in which we divide ourselves biologically, culturally, socially, and politically and then uncovering inequities in media treatment by these different partitions. The most objective form of division has also been the most investigated: the gender variable. While differences between sex (largely defined biologically) and gender (largely defined within social constructions of masculine and feminine notions and expectations) have been discussed for decades, research has largely employed biological divisions because sport, in its very nature, enacts men’s and women’s sport as two separate entities. Even in events such as Wimbledon (tennis) championships or the Olympics in which both men and women compete, the events are divided by gender and function primarily as separate events. As such, the preponderance of mediasport studies has examined how entrenched notions of masculinity often result in less prominence and respect for women’s sport. Advancements for women’s sport have occurred in terms of opportunities to compete; O’Reilly and Cahn (2007) describe the post-Title IX era as a “spectacular transformation . . . in which the right to play sports and receive resources commensurate with men’s sports is rarely disputed” (pp. xi–xii). Nonetheless, media coverage of women’s sport has not increased in salience. For instance, people can find television channels highlighting women’s sports, yet they tend to be less prominent than similar outlets for men. Where men’s athletics frequently are aired on the big four broadcasting networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX) along with the cable network ESPN, women’s sports often are relegated to secondary channels; for instance, men’s golf is routinely offered on broadcast networks such as CBS, NBC, and ABC, while women’s golf is usually located on the Golf Channel or ESPN2. Studies have also shown that the discourse used by media gatekeepers is substantially different between men and women, often serving to diminish women’s athletic achievements.

Another prime area of mediasport scholarship on identity has been the examination of race or ethnicity. Again, even agreeing upon common definitions of race and ethnicity is a yeoman’s task in many ways, as people who consume mediasport largely operationally define race as skin color, while other scholars argue for much more complex unpacking of this identity variable (Carrington, 2007). Despite increased

comprehensive understanding of ethnicity and the problems inherent with artificial assemblage of identity groupings, sportscasters and other media gatekeepers largely continue to describe the action with stereotypical Black/White categorical distinctions, often resulting in an amalgamation of disparate ethnicities into overarching categories defined solely by one's skin color. Thus, athletes such as Fijian golfer Vijay Singh, Cablinasian golfer Tiger Woods, and French basketball player Tony Parker are frequently all subjected to biases applied to "Black" athletes even though each has a distinctively different ethnic background.

New York University sociologist Troy Duster argues that race is predominantly a cultural invention, postulating that "if you believe these differences are real, why wouldn't you slip into the thinking that performance, in the classroom or on the basketball court, is also explainable by genetic or biological differences?" (Dokoupil, 2007, p. 14). Duster is essentially arguing the cause of many ethnic findings in mediasport, which tend to show discourse differences that often can be reduced to distinctions of genetic versus learned athletic ability. Edwards (1969, 1973) claims that such discussions are not only inaccurate, they are also damaging in the inverse, seemingly arguing that Blacks lack diligence and cognitive abilities and that Whites lack the physical genetics to excel at the highest levels of modern athletics. As the argument tends to be summarized, Whites are portrayed as smart and Blacks as athletic; the problem occurs when the inverse is presumed not to be true. The damage permeates all races within modern culture because, for instance, by buying into the notion that Black athletes are genetically superior to them, "the White race thus becomes the chief victim of its own myth" (Edwards, 1973, p. 197). Indeed, it is not an insurmountable, cognitive leap to claim that portrayals of White athletes as born leaders of team sports (i.e., "natural" point guards in basketball or quarterbacks in football [Wonsek, 1992]) can impact non-White participation enacting self-fulfilling prophecies in leadership positions within organizational structures.

A third area of identity scholarship in mediasport involves the close analysis of nationalism. Bairner (2001) contends that the power of sport-induced nationalism is vast, with the capability to influence millions of people internationally, and scholars have found this to be true as well. Unlike gender and ethnicity, nationality (at least within international sports competitions such as the World Cup or the Olympics) can be overtly defined by the apparel worn by an athlete, creating an "us versus them" dichotomy with the potential to impact social and political views (O'Donnell, 1994). Indeed, nationalism can be a primary reason for consumers of mediasport to care about an event they would

otherwise not know anything about, as millions of people routinely cheer on divers, snowboarders, and badminton players in the name of patriotism.

However, constructions (and related analyses) of identity in mediasport are not merely limited to gender, ethnicity, and nationality. Other forms of identity have been examined as a form of sub-niche, not because they are less important but because they are harder to uncover or much less easily decipherable via a media outlet. Issues such as economic status, religion, sexual orientation, political convictions, and social views are not identity forms that are directly observable by looking at the body or correlating uniform. As such, the issues surrounding these social divides tend to percolate within discussions of other forms of identity and many times rightly so (as, for instance, a discussion of Middle Eastern religious beliefs usually directly relates to views on gender roles).

A double-edged sword persists within mass media, as gatekeepers often feel uninformed on all forms of identity or have determined that increased awareness of these perceived social divides would only exacerbate tensions (e.g., continually pointing out the race of an athlete as a primary story could seem problematic depending on the treatment). The result is a “dropped conversation” about identity that includes both (a) the lack of any cogent dialogue about identity when it is appropriate—and sometimes primary to storytelling—within the sporting context, and (b) the surface-level dialogue that functions as discourse within other spheres of modern sport media in the United States.

The mere existence of a book such as ours underscores the degree to which discussing identity would bring added salience to the construction of identity in mediasport. The notion of power underscores all of these chapters—the power to shape public opinion, the power to reach millions of people, the power to help an individual cognitively shape a “reality,” however flawed that conception may be. As Billings, Brown, Crout, McKenna, Rice, Timanus, and Zeigler (2008) write, “It appears that history is not always written by the winners; it is also written by those with the television rights” (p. 229). This book furthers this notion, arguing that any form of mediasport that has the power to reach millions also has the potential for tremendous social influence. The consumers of these messages certainly have free will to resist these overt and covert agendas, yet sport is also known as the world’s most pervasive form of escapism, consequently resulting in millions of people who are more likely to consume identity-oriented messages in a peripheral rather than central processing route (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

❖ CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

The rest of this volume contains various methodologies and epistemologies that arise from inside and outside of the communication discipline. Each chapter is structured with the same headings (such as “Methods” and “Results”) to show that regardless of the approach to studying identity in sport, each has a specific theoretical frame and methodology that is employed to ultimately yield worthwhile results. This inclusiveness is a primary aim of the book, with the goal being that any person who has taken foundational courses in communication should be able to logically follow the arguments presented, whether that person is an advanced undergraduate or a seasoned academician.

The opening chapters focus on one of the largest divides in identity analysis: gender. Chapter 2 offers insights on gender through a more specialized and localized lens as Marie Hardin and Erin Whiteside examine “morality tales that naturalize a broader cultural hegemony,” specifically as they relate to both gender and sexuality. Hardin and Whiteside use the case of Pennsylvania State University basketball coach Rene Portland to address how print media (both newspapers and magazines) symbolically allowed for homophobia to become entrenched within college sport, particularly in regard to the female athlete. Such analyses show how the “default” option for many journalists is to rely on “traditional” and often outdated gender roles to determine senses of sexual normality.

Kim Bissell then continues the dialogue about gender identity in mass media in Chapter 3 with an examination of sports media effects on adolescent girls. She ties issues of self-esteem and self-worth to the participation and consumption of sport, illustrating the double-edged sword within sports media, as learned media effects can result in both positive and/or negative responses about one’s notion of self, ranging from perception of attractiveness to the conception of what a “healthy” body could or should be.

In Chapter 4, Lindsey Meân examines organizational gender entrenchment and the online identities these entities adopt and, in doing so, discusses the most widely played sport on the planet: soccer/fútbol. Meân studies the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and World Cup Web sites in terms of production and content values, finding vast differences by gender. She concludes that “the continued re/production of women’s soccer as primarily about femaleness undermines women’s identities as athletes.” The examination also emphasizes the scope of mediasport, with billions of people across every inhabitable continent interested in events such as the men’s and women’s World Cups.

Then in Chapter 5, we witness an in-depth examination of how “sport has long stirred the drink of gender identity” within beer commercials, written by Lawrence Wenner. In examining the intersections of gender, sport, media, and beer, Wenner claims that “it is the sanctity of this cultural space that has allowed brewers to pander for years to men with ‘beer babes’ from the ‘Swedish bikini team’ to the Coors twins.” Analyzing a “six-pack” of beer company practices, Wenner claims that media productions such as beer advertisements tend to define masculinity or femininity in terms of the negative argument—that being a man is defined as being not feminine and vice versa.

Bryan Denham and Andrea Duke’s chapter on newspaper coverage of doping allegations surrounding seven-time Tour de France champion Lance Armstrong serves as a bridge from the negotiation of gender to the negotiation of nationality. Touching on both of these intertwined issues using content analytic methods, Denham and Duke contend that while the U.S. media portrayed Armstrong as a hero who symbolically defined American values, the international media judged Armstrong much more harshly, emphasizing allegations of drug use and both directly and indirectly comparing his “rogue” warrior status to current U.S. policies toward Iraq and beyond. The chapter underscores the notion that sport does not take place in a vacuum, especially when the most-watched sporting events in the world are international: the Olympics, the World Cups, and, in this case, cycling’s greatest spectacle, the Tour de France.

Chapter 7 features the work of Michael Butterworth as he studies the theatrical text employed within the 2004 movie *Miracle*. Bairner (2001) argues that “sport and nationalism are arguably two of the most emotive issues in the modern world” (p. xi), and Butterworth dissects these two concepts jointly in the screen-written and directed narrative of a non-fictional event: the improbable U.S. victory over the Soviet Union in the 1980 Winter Olympics hockey semifinal. He concludes that the rhetorical analysis of *Miracle* exemplifies the “us versus them” themes that tend to gloss over the complexities of nationalistic identity.

Mary McDonald’s contributions in Chapter 8 allow for the transition to the discussion of race, specifically within an examination of Whiteness. She notes “the exclusionary tactics and political workings, practices, and institutions of the dominant culture” that are endemic within sports media. Using examples that span a century, McDonald articulates sporting narratives that remain pervasive when discussing race in the modern culture.

This approach then is followed by a social scientific approach in Chapter 9, in which Benjamin Goss, Andrew Tyler, and Andrew Billings

adopt a longitudinal content analysis to the examination a longitudinal content analysis to the examination of decades of *Sports Illustrated* covers depicting professional basketball players. While Black athletes have been increasingly depicted in more intellectual ways as time has progressed, some preconceived notions—such as Black hyper-aggressiveness—remain. The authors contend that major media gatekeepers (such as the sports magazine flagship that is *SI*) are often viewed as trendsetters, making their impacts potentially more directly meaningful.

Chapter 10 offers movie analysis in that James Cherney and Kurt Lindemann study the identity variable of disability within the 2005 documentary *Murderball*. Disability sport participation is often used for rehabilitation from spinal cord injury, in part because of the growing need for recreational outlets for physically disabled persons. Quadriplegic rugby plays a central role in this process. Approximately 8,000 people in the U.S. suffer spinal cord injuries every year, and currently between 250,000 and 400,000 people in the U.S. live with spinal cord injuries (National Spinal Cord Injury Association [NSCIA], 2003). Noting that most mainstream media images of disabled athletes “tend[s] to frame participation as helping those with spinal cord injuries ‘overcome’ their disability,” Cherney and Lindemann postulate the account of the quadrapalegic rugby team’s cinematic story as a counterbalance. Cherney and Lindemann even explore the notion of the camera’s “gaze,” explaining how the image being projected is not only more positive, but also more “real,” especially in this documentary format.

The final two chapters in this volume attempt to move beyond the specific identity-oriented variables previously analyzed to focus on the characteristics of the people who consume the sports media messages and the theoretical implications of this consumption. In Chapter 11, the first of these synthesis chapters, authors Jennings Bryant and R. Glenn Cummins take a broader, conceptual approach in which they use social identity theory and disposition theory to study the fans who consume the mediated sporting event. They pinpoint how the perceived self-identity of a fan changes as each final score is calculated for their beloved team. The survey approach they adopt reinforces how “for sports fans, both being a fan and being viewed as a fan are critical components of a person’s identity.” Thus, this functions as a synthesis chapter, allowing the negotiation to come full circle—the team’s play affects the fans, which affects the team’s self-identity, which affects the media’s portrayal of all forms of sport, including the identity issues that cannot be separated from the observable athletic performance. This negotiation is reinforced in Chapter 11 by Bryant and Cummins and is outlined in the final chapter from Kelby Halone, indicating how

these variables jointly influence a notion of identity that is impossible to specifically pinpoint.

The final chapter is a forward-thinking piece about the intersection of media discourse within institutional and interpersonal theoretical structures. Halone advocates a strong stance in favor of the institutionalized nature of mediated sport. By incorporating the structure advanced by Kassing, Billings, Brown, Halone, Harrison, Krizek, Meân, and Turman (2004) in a seminal *Communication Yearbook* piece, Halone articulates how sport becomes a negotiation through the enactment, (re)production, consumption, and organization of modern sport. Identity is not just formed by the producers of the mediated image, but is formed by the athletes themselves, the people watching and reading about the athletic performance, and the overarching organized structures that allow sport to occur. Halone incorporates a call for the reexamination of sports processes within the media, providing a capstone argument for the implications of the cases listed in prior chapters.

❖ IMPACT OF EXAMINING IDENTITY IN SPORTS MEDIA

Given that Boyd (1997) argued over a decade ago that “sports and the discourses that surround them have become one of the master narratives of twentieth-century culture” (p. ix), the primary aim of this book is to decipher and interrogate the construction of master narratives that are conveyed within and among media outlets. Some of the chapters isolate identity variables, some offer forward-thinking textual analyses of the master narratives in which Boyd refers; all offer unique insight into the production and consumption of a topic that many sport fans spend little, if any, time pondering or conceptualizing in formal senses. These chapters collectively advance knowledge in a field that continues to receive more examination and yet in many ways still has lifetimes of intellectual questions in its future.

In all, this volume aims to use concrete examples from mediasport to further the contention that the portrayal of identity—whether it involves gender, sexuality, nationality, race, disability, or fan affiliation—is a part of a grand negotiation between those who enact, produce, consume, and institutionalize sport and the mechanisms that arise from it. Plato once observed that “you can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation” (Smith, 2008, p. 24). The same type of insights could be postulated regarding the mediated sporting experience, particularly when considering that most fans are consuming much more than one hour of play on a systematic basis.

The way in which mediasport is represented and consumed can speak volumes about whom and what a society strives to be; the negotiation of identity plays an integral role in this process as well. We hope this volume encourages engaging conversations about the manner in which these identity issues are discussed and formulated cognitively and behaviorally within all facets of mediasport.

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