THE IMBALANCE OF COMMENTATORS’ DISCOURSE DURING A TELEVIZED BASKETBALL MATCH

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Abstract:
Sports reporters have journalistic duties and as a rule they should thus be objective. However, they often fail to comply with reporting standards and they become subjective. Such subjectivity can influence the spectator’s perception of events. In this pilot study, we analysed recorded broadcasts of a top-level basketball match aired by the national television broadcasters from the participating teams’ countries. We ascertained that half of all the remarks made by both commentators were facts. Approximately every fourth remark expressed an opinion, while every fifth remark was related to statistical data. Half of the commentators’ remarks related to the team perceived to be ours, 30% of the remarks related to the other team, 10% of the remarks related to the game time and score, while 10% of the remarks involved other comments. The commentators’ discourse was obviously imbalanced. During international competitions commentators evidently favour teams from their own country. Sports commentators thus hardly comply with journalistic standards. This, however, does not confirm the subjectivity of the commentators. Further research is needed to clarify this field and topics for future research are proposed.

Key words: media, sports commentator, sports broadcasts, reporter, play-by-play, analyst, pilot study

Introduction
There is no unique definition or general agreement as to what journalism is. Each of the several theoretical and practical conceptions of journalism emphasizes different aspects of the job. Such ambiguity is historical; as far back as at the turn of the previous century Bücher stated that the beginning of journalism varies according to our understanding of the term newspaper (Bücher, 1900; quoted by Splichal, 2001, p. 68).

Today’s so-called ‘Western civilizations’ understand journalism predominantly as “collecting, writing, editing, and spreading of information as well as other types of (especially spiritual) contribution to daily and periodical press, radio and television stations” (Splichal, 2000, p. 48). Such a definition characterizes the journalist’s work as essentially preparing and spreading information, making journalism fundamentally a craft. However, there are other more ideological definitions, such as Sapunar’s conception: “Journalism (…) ranks among the oldest human activities; its aim is to shape public opinion or to preserve the circulation of socially important information in a society with a common language” (Sapunar, 2000, p. 5). Schudson claims news is not a mirror of reality: “It is a representation of the world, and all representations are selective” (Schudson, 2003). Some authors focus on the journalist’s mission and conceive media as the watchdog of democracy (cf. Whitehouse, 2001; Košir, 2003). All in all, it is easier to identify the things that contemporary journalists do than to clearly label the functions and roles of journalism (Tapsall & Varley, 2001, p. 5).

Slovenian journalists identify “the public’s right to the best possible information” as the main journalistic guideline in their self-regulatory acts (Kodeks novinarjev Slovenije, 2002). Further, they “are bound to present a complete picture of events” (Kodeks novinarjev Slovenije, 2002). Croatian journalists share the same principles; further, their Code of Honour states that “journalists as all other citizens have the right to political and otherwise convictions and engagements” (Kodeks časti hrvatskih novinara, 2006). However, while working, the journalist “keeps a professional distance from current events, which is one of the requirements for objective and professional reporting regarding on-going events” (Kodeks časti hrvatskih novinara, 2006). The journalist’s task is thus to inform the public objectively (impartially) and thoroughly (cf. Society of Professional Journalists, 1996).

Sports journalism or journalism about sports is somewhat special. Boyle (2006) argues it remains in many ways a paradox. He says it has been traditionally viewed disparagingly as sloppy journalism. However, sports journalism has always had a
big commercial impact, especially on the popular press.

Boyle claims that sports journalism (Boyle, 2006, p. 2):

“[u]ntil recently, has been largely absent from journalism education and practice and similarly invisible among the growing critical literature from within media and communication studies which examines issues in and around journalism.”

Korošec argues that the essence of sports journalism is to report from a sporting event. The aspect of describing the course of a sporting match relates to the reporter’s task of journalism (Korošec, 2005, p. 259).

The unique individuality (Košir, 1988, p. 73) that makes sporting events newsworthy is their unpredictable outcome. Sports reporting should, as a rule, be objective but Korošec argues that especially when reporting about sports (2005, p. 262):

“[t]here is a special relationship between the communicator and the recipients. Spectators rely on (their) reporter, they trust his knowledge, they are often accustomed to him, understand him, and are even willing to accept inconsistencies with reporting standards, such as when a reporter shifts from reporting to excitement, from admiration of sports achievements to fanaticism, from praising a successful athlete to depreciation etc.”

Sports reporters thus occasionally fail to comply with reporting standards and get carried into subjectivity. However, the audience accepts such alterations as inevitable.

As a media content, sports enabled the development of specialized media. The most popular are specialized newspapers (i.e. L’Equipe, El mundo Deportivo, Gazetta dello Sport), among which the most prominent have an almost-centennial tradition. Lately, specialized sports television broadcasters such as Canal+, DSF, ESPN, Eurosport and Sportklub have become increasingly popular.

Television is particularly appealing for live broadcasts of sporting events. The final outcome of such events is unknown so the audience feels as if they are watching history in the making. This is best proven by the huge audiences that watch televised elite sporting events. The 2004 Olympic Games produced 34.4 billion global viewer hours, equivalent to each citizen older than four living in a country which broadcast the Olympic Games consuming 8 hours and 9 minutes of Olympic Games coverage (30 minutes every day) (Sports Marketing Surveys, 2004, p. 7). A similar must-see event is the FIFA World Cup. The 2006 FIFA World Cup final match between Italy and France achieved a 91.1% share in Italy (SIPRA, 2006), meaning that nine Italians out of ten who were watching television at the time tuned in to see the final match.

In Slovenia, sports broadcasts are accompanied by the spoken words of a commentator or reporter¹. During the broadcast they represent the television station they report for. Throughout a match they describe and to some extent also comment (give opinions on) the event. The reporter is rarely seen throughout the broadcast, but we normally hear his or her voice. Technical commentators often join the reporter. Their task is usually to convey in-depth technical information.

American sports events are usually commented on by two people, namely the play-by-play broadcaster and the analyst, also known as the colour analyst. The role of the play-by-play broadcaster is analogous to the role of the Slovenian reporter. His primary duty is to describe the course of events and frequently mention the current score and time. The colour analyst is usually a famous former athlete or coach and his task is to entertain the audience and to convey technical insights (Hedrick, 2000). Many American practitioners argue that the main task of the broadcaster is to prepare the ground for the colour analyst since he is supposed to be the star of the broadcast (Hedrick, 2000).

A balanced journalistic report plays an important role in allowing a proper and realistic representation of media contents. Representation is the process whereby members of the same culture produce and exchange meanings, and this process is achieved through language (Hall, 1997). Some researches (Wilson, 1997; van Sterkenburg, & Knoppers, 2004) have already acknowledged imbalances in reporting about sporting events. In English football, black groups of spectators identified the existence of media sport racial stereotypes, which were fed and reaffirmed through commentator discourse (McCarthy, Jones, & Potrac, 2003). It has also been proven that mediated sports are gender-biased as the proportion of mentions of women and men athletes is imbalanced, regardless of their success (Eastman & Billings, 1999). On the Slovenian scale, differences between broadcasts of male and female team handball matches have been researched by Bon and Doupona Topič (2004). They ascertained that the discourse of the (same) reporter is more informative and varied during a male team handball match. Further, successful actions carried out by male players are more emphasized and the broadcasts of male matches are technically richer.

Team sports are played by two teams. If we assume a reporter is objective and impartial, we ex-

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¹ On the Slovenian national television broadcaster, a sports journalist who reports from sporting events is referred to as a reporter (Slovenian: reporter). In the past, the term commentator (Slovenian: komentator) was also used. Today, the term reporter is used as many journalists argue that it is impossible to comment on an event as it happens.
pect both teams will (regardless of the reporter) get mentioned at approximately the same frequency. To test this assumption, we recorded the live broadcast of a basketball match on two different television stations and compared both reporters’ discourse, that is their delivery of certain types of information throughout their broadcasts.

**Methods**

We analysed recorded broadcasts of a top-level (Euroleague) basketball match between Union Olimpija Ljubljana and Cibona Zagreb aired by two national television broadcasters: the Slovenian TV Slovenija (TVS) and the Croatian Hrvatska televizija (HTV). The match was played in Zagreb on 26 October, 2006.

The commentator on TVS was a former top-level basketball player. He has been a basketball commentator for this channel for about ten years. He is employed under contract by the station and is a member of the Slovenian Association of Sports Journalists (Društvo športnih novinarjev Slovenije – DSNS). 2 The commentator on HTV was a former basketball player with about thirty years’ experience as a commentator of various sports. He is a full-time employee of the station and a member of the Croatian Association of Sports Journalists (Hrvatski zbor sportskih novinara – HZSN). 3

The commentator on HTV worked with about thirty years’ experience as a commentator of various sports. He is a full-time employee of the station and a member of the Croatian Association of Sports Journalists (Hrvatski zbor sportskih novinara – HZSN).

The broadcast on TVS started with several minutes of delay because of a preceding sports broadcast. Overall it lasted 90 minutes without commercial breaks.

The broadcast aired on HTV lasted 96 minutes without commercial breaks. The broadcast started approximately five minutes before the beginning of the match. Both TV stations broadcast short sideline interviews with players and/or coaches in the break after the second and fourth quarter of the match. The two interviews on TVS lasted altogether approximately 3 minutes while the one interview on HTV lasted about two minutes. The interview questions and answers were not analysed.

We thus analysed 87 minutes of the single-person broadcast on TVS and 94 minutes of the two-person broadcast on HTV.

The quantitative analysis with regard to the content of information included the number of times each team and each team’s players, the referees, the game score, game time, and the number of times other information were mentioned.

The qualitative analysis with regard to the type of information included the classification of each unit of information as a fact, a description of action, an opinion, or statistical data.

We classified as facts all remarks related to an objective condition, including an objective description of events, statements regarding the current game time and score.

We classified as a description of action all objective descriptions of the players’ actions and referees’ decisions. Such remarks include objective descriptions of movements or actions made and do not include the speakers’ opinion or judgment on the event.

We classified as opinions remarks expressing the broadcasters’ subjective view or opinion regarding actions or events throughout the match. Opinions were treated as such regardless of their foundation or the researchers’ agreement with them.

As statistical data we classified all remarks regarding statistical data on the players or teams.

Each statement made by a commentator (regardless of its classification) is considered a distinct unit of information.

**Table 1. Criteria for the qualitative classification of the broadcasters’ statements.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>Objective statement regarding a fact, an event or a condition.</td>
<td>TVS: “Personal foul on A.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>HTV: “Twenty-five: nineteen, a six-point lead.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of action</td>
<td>Objective description of players’ and referees’ actions.</td>
<td>TVS: “Rebound by B.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>HTV: “C changes the direction of movement.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td>Broadcaster’s subjective view or opinion regarding actions or events.</td>
<td>TVS: “Another easy basket for D.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>HTV: “A clumsy action by Cibona.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistical data</td>
<td>Statistical data of any kind (excluding the current score).</td>
<td>TVS: “E, ten points.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>HTV: “F scores all three free throws.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 The regulations of the Slovenian Association of Sport Journalists (2006) state that candidates applying for membership in the Association have to “have worked predominantly in sports journalism at least two years”.

3 The regulations of the Croatian Association of Sports Journalists (2003) state that it unites “all professional and freelance journalists who work predominantly in sports journalism”. The Association is affiliated with the Croatian Journalists’ Association.
We divided the recorded units of information with regard to the time they were stated. Units of information were thus divided as being stated during playing time or during intermissions (time-outs, intervals between periods, time before the beginning or after the end of the match).

Each unit of information was chronologically recorded on an appropriate sheet. We took note of the type (quality) of information and of the subject to which the statement applied. We then determined the frequency of each type of statement for both broadcasts.

**Results**

**Quantitative analysis of the commentators’ discourse**

In Table 2 the number and share of units of information spoken by the commentators during the basketball match broadcasts are presented. The data were divided with regard to the time the information was spoken (statements during playing time or intermissions).

Despite his slightly shorter broadcast time the Slovenian commentator spoke more units of information than the two commentators on the Croatian television together. This is due to the conversations occasionally held by the two Croatian commentators: during such dialogues the technical analyst often explained specific information more thoroughly. This is actually one of the key features of such roles (see Bender & Johnson, 1994, and Hedrick, 2000). Such information, if pertaining to a single concept, was counted as a single unit of information despite its thoroughness. On the other hand, the Slovenian commentator performed his task alone. He thus focused on a description of the events and was less analytical.

A comparison of the share of information given by each commentator on HTV shows that the technical analyst stated approximately three times less units of information than the commentator. However, the analyst was relatively more talkative during the intermissions. Such breaks are obviously a proper time for a thorough analysis of a match in progress.

**Qualitative analysis of the commentators’ discourse**

In Table 3 the number and share of different types of information spoken by the commentators are presented. The data are divided according to the time the information was stated (during playing time or intermissions). The different types of comments combined form the commentators’ discourse throughout the match.

Approximately half of all remarks spoken by both commentators were classified as facts – that is, objective descriptions of the actions of the players, referees or coaches.

Approximately every fourth remark (TVS: 21%, HTV: 27%) made by the commentators expressed an opinion. These were thus subjective descriptions and judgments of actions or other events during the playing time.

About every fifth remark made by the Slovenian commentator related to statistical data. The Croatian commentator made fewer remarks regarding statistical data; however, such information was also given by the Croatian technical analyst.

Twenty-five percent of the remarks made by the Croatian technical analyst were objective descriptions of facts or actions, while two remarks out of
three were opinions. The analyst’s task is thus obviously to explain the causes of individual actions. He takes advantage of his insights to analyse a player’s performance, a coach’s tactical choice and even to ‘think aloud’ and suggest which decisions he would take if he were courtside.

Approximately ten percent of the technical analyst’s comments related to statistical data. He thus obviously frequently substantiated his claims with relevant figures.

**Themes of discourse**

In Table 4 the number and share of spoken units of information with regard to their themes are presented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TVS During playing time</th>
<th>TVS During intermissions</th>
<th>HTV During playing time</th>
<th>HTV During intermissions</th>
<th>HTV commentator During playing time</th>
<th>HTV commentator During intermissions</th>
<th>HTV technical analyst During playing time</th>
<th>HTV technical analyst During intermissions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Croatian player</td>
<td>53 (5%)</td>
<td>19 (2%)</td>
<td>108 (10%)</td>
<td>55 (5%)</td>
<td>55 (7%)</td>
<td>26 (3%)</td>
<td>53 (20%)</td>
<td>29 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatian team</td>
<td>227 (21%)</td>
<td>26 (3%)</td>
<td>321 (31%)</td>
<td>62 (6%)</td>
<td>241 (31%)</td>
<td>51 (7%)</td>
<td>80 (30%)</td>
<td>11 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenian player</td>
<td>125 (11%)</td>
<td>33 (3%)</td>
<td>45 (4%)</td>
<td>24 (2%)</td>
<td>30 (4%)</td>
<td>9 (1%)</td>
<td>15 (6%)</td>
<td>15 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenian team</td>
<td>348 (32%)</td>
<td>67 (6%)</td>
<td>188 (18%)</td>
<td>34 (3%)</td>
<td>154 (20%)</td>
<td>27 (4%)</td>
<td>34 (13%)</td>
<td>7 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Score</td>
<td>40 (4%)</td>
<td>15 (1%)</td>
<td>45 (4%)</td>
<td>11 (1%)</td>
<td>45 (6%)</td>
<td>10 (1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing time</td>
<td>25 (2%)</td>
<td>8 (1%)</td>
<td>43 (4%)</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td>38 (5%)</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td>5 (2%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>72 (6%)</td>
<td>40 (3%)</td>
<td>49 (5%)</td>
<td>45 (4%)</td>
<td>40 (5%)</td>
<td>41 (5%)</td>
<td>9 (3%)</td>
<td>4 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>890 (81%)</td>
<td>208 (19%)</td>
<td>799 (77%)</td>
<td>234 (22%)</td>
<td>603 (78%)</td>
<td>167 (22%)</td>
<td>196 (74%)</td>
<td>67 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All information</td>
<td>1,098 (100%)</td>
<td>1,033 (100%)</td>
<td>770 (100%)</td>
<td>263 (100%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both reporters tended to favour reporting information regarding the team from their own country. Namely, the Slovenian reporter devoted 52% of his comments to the Slovenian team and its players⁴, while the Croatian reporter devoted 48% of his comments to the Croatian team and its players (Table 4, boldfaced).

Approximately half of a commentator’s remarks thus refer to the team he perceives to be his. This figure was even higher for the Croatian technical commentator as he mentioned his (that is, the Croatian) team and players on 65% of the occasions.

Less frequent did the commentators mention the opposing team. Both commentators and the Croatian technical analyst devoted about 30% of their comments to the team that did not come from the same country.

Approximately 10% of the comments related to the current game time or score. Another 10% of comments related to other contents, such as scores of other matches in progress, comments regarding fans, upcoming matches, etc.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The structure of the mediated information is roughly the same for both commentators, despite the difference in the duration of their broadcasts.

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⁴ To claim that the Slovenian commentator devoted his comments to Slovenian players would be inaccurate as Union Olimpija had on its roster eight Slovenian players and five foreign players. Cibona Zagreb had the same proportion of Croatian and foreign players.
Both reporters oriented their audiences towards a common communication circle (Korošec, 2006, p. 618) by occasionally mentioning our basketball players and referring to the other team as the opponents. The latter were thus never referred to as they or them.

This confirms the commentator’s imbalance but not his subjectivity since an event can be (objectively) described in different ways. Olimpija wins the match describes a situation as objectively as Cibona loses the match. The situation is the same but described from a different speaker’s standpoint (which can in turn create a different connotation).

The formulation of a linguistic message depends (among other things) on the speaker’s style. “The concept of style presupposes the existence of objects which are essentially identical but which differ in some secondary, subservient feature or features” (Akhanova, 1976, p. 3). The selection of actualized stylistic elements and the consequent stylistic bias of the text give an additional meaning to the broadcasted picture. Television reporting entwines two semiological categories, language and picture (Korošec, 2005). We have not researched the details of such a creation of additional meaning.

Our study proved an imbalance in the comments made by the Croatian analyst. Almost two thirds of his remarks referred to his, that is, the Croatian team. The same was the share of opinions he expressed in relation to his entire speaking. The latter is no surprise: the technical analyst’s role is to offer viewers a deeper understanding of the ongoing events. He can achieve this by exploiting his specific and in-depth knowledge of the sport. American TV stations generally appoint as colour analysts the most picturesque, eccentric and somehow unique athletes or coaches; their primary goal is to attract viewers with their colourful comments, not to be thoroughly objective (Bender & Johnson, 1994; Hedrick, 2000). Sports commentators should strive to inform spectators about the game in progress as objectively and exhaustively as possible. This would assure a steady connection between sports reporting and journalism/reporting in general (Korošec, 2005).

In practice, sports commentators hardly achieve the journalistic canon of accurate information or pursue the ‘myth of objectivity’ (with the awareness that true objectivity is impossible to achieve, but a ‘sophisticated attempt’ to interpret events unbiased and thoroughly is made (McKnight, 2001, p. 50). We believe such behaviour is not driven by a wish to influence public opinion but by the commentators’ comprehension of their audiences’ expectations.

In this pilot study we assessed selected quantitative and qualitative parameters of commentators’ broadcasts during a top-level basketball match. To this end we analysed the recorded broadcasts of the match aired by television stations from both teams’ countries.

The analysis proved an imbalance in the commentator’s discourse throughout the match. They tend to favour reporting about the team from their own country. This does not necessarily mean their reporting is partial since a fact can be described from different perspectives. However, such an imbalance definitely creates a unique stylistic effect that can result in favouring the team perceived to be ours.

The results of this pilot study are not definite. They indicate many relevant topics and pose several questions for future research. Such research could include an analysis of commentators reporting at “neutral” matches, where none of the players or teams can be linked to them in any way. A thorough analysis of commentators’ performance in general on a bigger sample of televised matches is also needed.

Considering the share of opinions expressed by the commentators, a semantic analysis of such contents would be relevant. This would show the means adopted by the commentators to convey their opinions. A semantic analysis of the units of information categorized as facts would also be appropriate.

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5 Korošec calls a common communication circle (CCC) an instance where the three communication parameters (speaker, message, and addressee) are oriented to the same context of a situation.

6 “Actualization means a new, fresh, particular, unusual use of linguistic means to achieve a special effect” (Korošec, 1998: 15).
References


SAŽETAK

Uvod

Ne postoji jedinstvena definicija novinarstva. Svako od nekoliko teorijskih i praktičnih shvaćanja novinarstva naglašava različite aspekte ovog posla. Ipak, teoretičari se uglavnom slažu da bi novinari trebali objektivno (nepristrano) i cijenovito informirati javnost.

Kao medijski sadržaj, sport je omogućio razvoj posebnih medija. Specijalizirane novine i televizijski prijenosi poznati su u svijetu. Privlačnost sportskih događaja za medijsku javnost najbolje se može potvrditi ogromnom gledanosti televizijskih prijenosa vrhunskih sportskih natjecanja kao što su olimpijske igre ili svjetska nogometna prvenstva.

Sportski prijenosi popraćeni su komentarima sportskih novinara ili reportera. Tijekom utakmice oni opisuju i u određenom opsegu komentiraju događaje (iznose mišljenja o njima). Stručni mentor često se priključuju reporterima.

Sportski reporteri su novinari i imaju novinarske zadaće, stoga bi u skladu s pravilima novinarstva njihovi komentari trebali biti objektivni. Pa ipak, oni često ne uspjevaju zadržati reporterski standard i postaju subjektivni. Publika prihvaća takve otklove kao neizbježne pojave, ali navedena subjektivna postaju subjektivni. Publika prihvaća takve otklove kao neizbježne pojave, ali navedena subjektivna postaju subjektivni. Publika prihvaća takve otklove kao neizbježne pojave, ali navedena subjektivna postaju subjektivni. Publika prihvaća takve otklove kao neizbježne pojave, ali navedena subjektivna postaju subjektivni.