Access, Agenda-Building and Information Subsidies: Media Relations in Professional Sport

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Abstract
While much research has examined the composition of sport media and those charged with constructing it, namely sport journalists and editors, far less has explored an essential set of actors in the construction of news: sources. This study aimed to explore the construction of the sport media agenda from arguably the most important sport news sources: sport media relations managers. In particular, this paper asked: how do media staff in sports organisations influence the production of news? To answer this question, this paper is based on a qualitative, observational study of a professional Australian Rules football club in Australia, involving interviews, observations and document analysis. Research within a professional Australian Rules football club found that the club delivered high-quality information subsidies that met sports journalists’ newswork requirements. However, media access was almost solely limited to these information subsidies, which are highly subjective and negotiated, which in turn allowed the professional football club to significantly control the subsequent media agenda.

Keywords: Sport media; public relations; media relations; agenda-building; information subsidies
“Cricket writers are part of the circus. Generally you stayed at the same hotels and went to the same bars, so if a player had an issue with you, they had every chance to take it up. It was a better way — nowadays there would be some spin merchant brokering a deal”,


Amongst tales of the best stories found and missed, journalist Martin Blake’s retirement column in Melbourne newspaper The Age was sprinkled with memories that revealed close relationships with sources (Blake, 2012). In one particular anecdote, Blake described how Australian cricketer Shane Warne provided the exclusive on his mysterious “slider” ball: in Warne’s hotel room, where the Australian spinner was fresh out of the shower, naked, and smoking a cigarette. However, as Blake described above, in recent years there is increasing anecdotal evidence that this close relationship has changed. Rather than being a direct and personal relationship, the connection between journalists and sport sources is now likely to be mediated by a “spin merchant”, or sport media relations manager.

The influence of media relations staff on journalists’ work has drawn criticism from members of the Australian media. In 2012, then Sydney Morning Herald columnist Richard Hinds wrote that gaining access to sources in rugby league was difficult, placing particular emphasis on a new National Rugby League (NRL) media policy that had allowed some clubs to hide their key players (Hinds, 2012). In 2013, reporters criticised Basketball Australia for shutting the media out of an Australian national men’s team camp in Canberra (Gaskin, 2013; Ward, 2013). In 2014, Daily Telegraph deputy editor Paul Kent used his weekly column to criticise the NRL again, referring to specific examples in which clubs had refused the media access to key, newsworthy sources (Kent, 2014). The journalists who expressed an opinion on these issues seemed genuinely puzzled by this
refusal to grant access to sources. For example, Ward (2013) wrote of the Basketball Australia decision: “getting [team member Matthew Dellavedova] on screen and in newspapers this week would be a priceless shot in the arm for the sport”. A review of the literature on sport media management serves to confirm why these journalists have been surprised by the actions of sport organisations, because the vast majority of academic research in this area has found that the main role of media staff is to gain media coverage by facilitating access, not by restricting it (Fortunato, 2000; Stoldt, Miller and Vermillion, 2009). In the context of this anecdotal evidence, that sport organisations in Australia and elsewhere are restricting sport journalists’ access to key sport sources, this study sought to explore how Australian sport media managers influence the production of news, through one critical case study of media management practice at a professional Australian Rules football club.

Literature Review

In setting the scene for engaging with the central question as stated above, this paper engages with two major bodies of literature, first, literature on news sources and agenda building, and second, literature on sports newswork, sports media relations and agenda building. In engaging with this literature, this paper seeks to extend this body of work by furthering our understanding of how agenda building is occurring in contemporary sporting contexts.

News Sources, Media Relations Practitioners and Agenda-Building

Agenda-building theory attributes the media agenda to three particular influences: the norms and traditions of journalism, such as newswork and journalistic ideology (Deuze and Marjoribanks, 2009); intermedia agenda-setting effects (where smaller media outlets tend to defer to major news producers – such as The New York Times – to set the agenda); and the continuous interactions of news organisations
with numerous sources, and the individual agendas of those sources’ (McCombs, 2013). However, the role of sources has often been conceptualised as the key influencer (Carlson, 2009), and the production of news labelled as “the perpetual process of authorising facts and figures through official sources” (Ericson, 1998: 86). One group of sources, public relations or media relations practitioners, have been found to be particularly influential, so much so that Macnamara (2014) suggested in a review of content analysis research that somewhere between 40-75% of media in the past 100 years, in the US, United Kingdom and Australia, had been routinely sourced from or influenced by public relations practitioners. One of the main strategies that public relations practitioners use to influence the agenda is to provide information subsidies, which can be defined as pre-packaged information for use by media that aims to reduce the cost of producing news (Gandy, 1982; Turk, 1985). Information subsidies may come in many forms, such as media releases, media conferences, off-the-record briefings, interviews, phone calls or access to celebrity spokespeople, but direct access to sources has been found to be the most effective in building the media agenda (Sweetser and Brown, 2008). The information subsidy is particularly valued by media relations practitioners as a method to gain media coverage, but also as a way to frame it (Zoch and Molleda, 2006). As Entman (1993: 52) noted, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text.” By invoking certain frames, media relations practitioners can select and highlight some issues or views, while relegating others.

Sport Newsworth, Sport Media Relations and Agenda-Building

The sport media agenda has been found to consistently favour male professional sport (Caple et al., 2011; Cooky et al., 2015; Fink, 2014), to offer little diversity across publications, and to focus simply on previewing, presenting and reviewing games (English, 2014; Rowe, 2007). Research on sport newsworth suggests that this is because of the particular “demand conditions” of sport journalism work (Marr et al, 1999). Sport journalism work is organised to a “beat”, where journalists must file a story on that beat,
even if there is nothing particularly newsworthy to report (Lowes, 1999). In this way sport journalism is highly routinised and reliant on official sources. In some cases, sport journalists are even likely to avoid negative or controversial stories about their sources, in order to keep their relationship with those sources intact (Boyle et al., 2002; Rowe, 2004). At the same time, there is an increasing demand from media companies and consumers for sports news and information. In order to facilitate the related incessant demand of sport newswork, professional sport organisations – which are largely those that have beats assigned to them – have employed media relations managers to provide information subsidies. Theberge and Cronk (1986) go so far to suggest that male sport dominates the news pages not simply because of newsroom priorities, but also because of the system that sport organisations have developed to support it:

The advantage enjoyed by men’s sports lies not simply in the assumption of greater public interest but in the greater organisational and institutional resources of men’s sports that guarantee preferred access to the media (Theberge and Cronk, 1986: 198).

Fortunato’s (2000) study of the US National Basketball Association (NBA) media relations strategies indicated that there is an extensive range of information subsidies used by sport organisations. The NBA’s strategies to attract media attention included regular media releases, media conferences, statistics packages and events, as well as policies to ensure journalists could access athletes and coaches pre and post-match. Other research on major sport events, such as the Paralympic Games and FIFA World Cups (Howe, 2008; Sugden and Tomlinson, 2007), shows that in addition to daily statistical information, media releases and other official content, there are a series of regular media conferences and mixed zones – a designated area either on the field of play or next to it which athletes must pass through post event – where journalists can engage with sources. However, access is often limited to these highly regulated and controlled opportunities or spaces, which has attracted criticism. Commenting on the Paralympic Games,
Howe stated that “the structure of the mix [sic] zone imposed by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) ‘helps’ to shape media products, leaving those who gathered quotes here little choice but to write celebratory stories” (Howe, 2008: 148). Sugden and Tomlinson (2007: 49) argued that little of the information presented in FIFA press conferences had a critical edge and, further, that reliance on these sources produces “at best bland journalism and at worst, institutionalised propaganda.”

There is research that indicates sport journalists are frustrated with the increasingly controlled access they are provided by sport organisations (Coombs and Osborne, 2012; Grimmer and Kian, 2013; Sherwood and Nicholson, 2013; Suggs, 2015). This frustration is most likely linked to their inability to develop source relationships outside the media management staff, which had previously allowed them to verify or clarify material delivered through information subsidies. In Lowes’ (1999) study of sports news production, while sport organisations’ information subsidies were important to journalists’ newswork, sport journalists had a network of other sources that they spoke to regularly and informally, and these were crucial news sources. For example, Buck Colvin – a journalist in Lowes’ (1999) study – stated he would not have captured a story about a star player’s new contract had he relied solely on information provided by the club: “Without a source in the organisation I never would have got that story. The team’s [media relations director] sure as hell wouldn’t have given it to me – they wait until they are ready to break that kind of stuff, you know, when it suits them” (Lowes, 1999: 73).

This review of the existing literature suggests that sport media management staff play a significant role in building the media agenda, yet there is little research that examines their every-day work practices. This study aimed to explore this gap by asking one overarching question: How does the work of Australian sport media relations staff influence the production of news? This paper presents the results of a case study conducted at a professional Australian Rules football club, focusing on the information subsidies
delivered, the ways in which access to these subsidies is governed, and subsequent media coverage.

Furthering our understanding of these processes is important as it deepens our understanding of a crucial aspect of the media sport industry.

Method

Yin’s (2013) case study method was employed for this study. This was partly because qualitative research has contributed some of the most important insights into the construction of the sport media agenda, but also because there is currently a lack of qualitative research that examines the influences behind the construction of the sports media agenda (Wenner, 2015), particularly in Australia. Further to this, a qualitative case study provided the most appropriate means for engaging with the key research question.

According to Yin (2013), case studies cannot and should not ascribe to regular sampling logic. Instead, each case study should be selected on its ability for replication of theory, in particular so it either “(a) predicts similar results (a literal replication) or (b) predicts contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons (a theoretical replication)” (Yin, 2013: 54). This study was one part of a broader three-stage study, within which the first two stages were used to guide the selection of the final case study. Analysis of the previous two stages of research in this study – a survey and interviews with Australian sport media relations practitioners – indicated that the work practices of these staff varies most depending on which type of organisation they work for: a professional sports club or a sport governing body. Professional sport organisations received more media enquiries than sport governing bodies; further, they conducted more media opportunities and were more likely to dictate who would appear at those media opportunities, rather than let journalists decide. Therefore, a professional club was selected for this critical case study. The site of research was selected on the basis that one or more of its staff members had been involved in the first two stages of research, and that it was a high-profile club in Australia’s most successful sporting
league – the Australian Football League (AFL). The AFL currently consists of 18 teams in five Australian states. AFL clubs operate with member or association ownership models, and in a context of equalisation policies that include a salary cap and concession draft picks. The AFL generated $458 million (AUD) in revenue in 2014, and individual clubs between $30 and $70 million (AUD) (Baker, 2014; King, 2015). The AFL’s latest broadcast deal is worth $2.5 billion (AUD), which is the highest price ever paid for Australian sporting rights (Stensholt and Mason, 2015). In 2015 the league’s average crowd attendance was 32,436, which was the fourth highest in the world, behind only the NFL, Bundesliga and English Premier League (AAP, 2015). A limitation of this study is that it can only report on one club, however, it does offer important insights into media management work at an elite level professional football club.

Ethics approval was sought and received from the La Trobe University human research ethics committee, and data collection for the critical case study was conducted across one seven-day week in the middle of the season in 2014. Data collected included interviews with key staff within the media department, detailed observation field notes, documents such as media requests, media releases and advisories, media articles, and other associated documents, such as league and club media policies. The initial stage of data analysis included multiple readings of all field notes, interviews, and relevant documents. Basic quantitative analysis was used to quantify the number of information subsidies the club provided and the amount of subsequent media coverage, in order to provide a numerical overview of the influence of information subsidies on news production. For the qualitative analysis, all of the interviews conducted with staff in the club and the researcher’s own field notes were transcribed by the researcher, to allow these to be coded as texts in NVivo. Initial coding was conducted guided by the analysis procedures set out by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2013). Initial descriptive codes were developed focusing on the discussions and decision-making around access. Process coding, which can be described as coding to analyse human action and which is particularly useful when exploring routines of human life, (Saldaña,
2013) was then employed to analyse media access and the media staff members’ decision making at a secondary level. This allowed the analysis to move beyond a recounting of information subsidies provided and media coverage gained, to explore the underlying reasons for selecting particular sources for each information subsidy.

**Results**

A key aim of this study was to establish how media access to a professional sport club in Australia was governed. This research contends that media access in sport organisations in Australia is governed at four different levels: government, league, club, and individual. Media access to sport organisations is currently not governed directly at the government level. However, the Australian federal government played a significant role in the creation of the Code of Practice for Sports News Reporting, a voluntary code which was developed in 2010 as a response to a Senate inquiry into the Reporting of Sports News and the Emergence of Digital Media in 2009 (Hutchins and Rowe, 2010). The main aim of the code is to protect the right of news organisations to cover matches for news purposes. As such, it provides little guidance on the issue of how sport organisations should manage access between journalists and sources on an every-day level. At the league level, access is governed by a media and broadcaster policy. This policy underscores the importance of media compliance, in particular of working with rights-holding broadcasters. The policy defines a set number of media opportunities per week, media requirements for rights-holding broadcasters, a post-match interview protocol, acceptable reasons for not completing media requests and potential sanctions. However, it mostly focuses on rights-holding media and offers little guidance on how clubs should respond to general requests from non-rights holding media. At the organisational level, the club has a media policy that is presented each year as part of a pre-season presentation and in a player handbook. The policy is guided by a notion of being accessible and open. However, the implementation of this policy is carried out by a group of individuals working in the media
department. During the week of the case study, there were three staff members that had some involvement in managing media access. For the purposes of this article, they will be described as Media Manager 1, Media Manager 2 and Media Manager 3. They have a background in journalism, media relations and sports media relations respectively. The department is led by Media Manager 1, who stated that the media department encourages all players to undertake media commitments and that “the attitude here is, it’s not good enough to not want to do media”. All media requests must go through the media management team, and they make an initial judgment call on the request. Therefore, access between journalists and sport sources at this club is most often dictated by individual staff in the media department. While they worked within the guidelines provided by league, it is important to note that the media staff within the club ultimately wielded the most control over media access.

A significant finding was that almost all media access to club sources (i.e., players, coaches and administration staff), in the week of the case study, was governed by the media management team. During the week it was observed that the media would watch the players train from the sidelines, then enter a room set up for a formal press conference. The club’s media staff would often chat informally to journalists before and after these media conferences, but there was very rarely an opportunity for the players or coaches to do so. The players and coaches were moved in and out of the media conference, with almost all interaction occurring in a formal and highly regulated environment. The post-match period represented another opportunity where players and media could potentially have interacted directly, however, all media organisations still negotiated their requests through the media team. While players stood just a few metres away, journalists stood behind a barrier and asked for the media management team to fetch the players they wished to interview. The media staff mentioned that there were occasions when coaches might interact informally and off-the-record with journalists, but this did not seem to apply to players. The time that journalists and players spent together was therefore almost
always on-the-record. Media access to club sources was delivered consistently through formal information subsidies. The club also had its own media platforms, such as a website and social media channels, its own content production staff, and it published 38 website stories and 30 videos during the week of the study. The club’s content production team set their own editorial agenda, interviewed players who were not used in other media opportunities, and operated almost independently of the media relations team. The content team negotiated with players directly, rather than request interviews through the media relations team, and did not use the same sources that were available to media – except in the case of formal press conferences, which were available as videos on the website. However, the content produced by the club’s in-house production team was not developed with the aim of being used by traditional media, but instead was aimed at engaging fans directly. Given that the study’s main question was to explore how media relations practice influences news, and in particular, focus on how media access is governed at a professional sports club, this paper focuses on the information subsidies that did have the direct aim of influencing news.

Information Subsidies

Table 1 below presents an overview of the information subsidies delivered by the media relations department in the research week. There was little reliance on the media release as a way of securing media coverage at this club. Only one traditional media release was issued, to launch a particular initiative. Two media advisories were issued to notify media of a press conference. Most of the information subsidies the club delivered during the week were interviews, such as media conferences, individual one-on-one requests and match-day rights-holding broadcaster requirements. Players, coaches and club sources at this AFL club were involved in 29 different information subsidies delivered directly to media across the week.
Most of the media interaction during the week occurred on match-day and with rights-holding radio and television broadcasters. Individual player profile pieces were likely to be conducted over the phone. The most frequently available talent was the senior coach, but he generally appeared in media conference settings and in the context of for rights-holding broadcaster requirements. There was evidence that the media appearance load was shared amongst sources, with six different players and three coaches available. There was also evidence that some media organisations pay for access to talent, though the club did not organise these opportunities – they were instead facilitated through individual player management.

**Media Coverage**

For the purpose of this study, media coverage included an analysis of the two major Melbourne daily newspapers, *The Age* and the *Herald Sun*, major commercial television news bulletins and online sources of major media outlets including newspapers (www.theage.com.au, www.heraldsun.com.au), sports broadcasters (www.foxsports.com.au, www.afl.com.au), and Australian national broadcasters (www.sbs.com.au and www.abc.net.au). As such, the following analysis does not represent the entirety of the media coverage achieved by the club across the week of the case study, but rather captures the extent of the media coverage in selected major media outlets. There were 74 pieces of media that featured the club during the week of the study, almost three times the amount of direct information subsidies provided. An important finding was that there were very few instances of media coverage that did not originate from within the club; the only stories that did were two opinion pieces on up and coming players, two match reports, and a story on a current out of form player that contained quotes from a former player. None of these five stories contained quotes from current club sources.
Aside from match-day, which could be reasonably expected to result in a spike in media coverage, the second most newsworthy event was the weekly coach press conference held on Tuesday. The Tuesday press conference generated multiple stories in both Melbourne’s major newspapers the next day, including four separate stories in *The Age*, and also led the major commercial television news bulletins. The coach press conference is a weekly, league mandated media opportunity. During the week of analysis the coach provided his opinion on league-wide issues, which might have increased overall media coverage, yet most of the conference consisted of questions related to the previous and upcoming matches. In total, quotes and footage from the weekly coach media conference appeared in 24 separate pieces of media content.

Overall, 93.2% of media items during the week that featured the club included a source that had been organised through the media department, had taken part in a media conference, or had been organised by a player manager for payment. From this, it could be concluded that the club provided a high level of access. Certainly, there was only one occasion during the week when direct access to a source was denied, however, the media management team sent quotes from the source to the newspaper journalist instead. However, this analysis does not reveal how the club managed access to these information subsidies, in which the professional club did not simply facilitate access, but rather used the information subsidies to frame the media agenda.

**Information Subsidy Negotiation**

As noted earlier, media access to this professional football club was limited to information subsidies. However, further analysis established that access to these information subsidies was not consistent, instead it was likely to depend on the type of information subsidy. Access to some information subsidies
was open to all. For example, anyone with league media accreditation could attend the midweek media conferences, or gain access to the changing (locker) rooms post-match. However, access to the highest-quality information subsidies, such as one-on-one, face-to-face interviews, was often subject to a process of negotiation with the media team. In one example, a newspaper journalist requested two players who were on media bans, which prompted Media Manager 2 to negotiate access to a different source, as illustrated in this quote below:

[Player three]… he’s doing something else this week… is there anyone else? [Player four], he did the Herald Sun last week… sorry… Do you have anyone else or would you like to think about it? [Player five] He hasn’t really done any media yet so it’s just what time. When were you thinking? I’ll have a chat to [Player five] maybe tomorrow and I’ll let you know.

In this example, the journalist ended up with his fifth selection. This is an exemplar of the way in which the club subtly affects the news agenda, primarily by selecting a source that meets their needs first, and the needs of the media outlet or journalist second. Media Manager 3 explored this concept further as part of a discussion related to messaging:

There are a lot of subtleties too. It’s not negotiation but you are almost pitching back to journalists…. journalists will request and you will say, ‘yes, but how about this player instead?’ Because we know that will allow us to achieve our own ends, while facilitating their need for content.
While the above example of negotiation indicates that journalists had some agency in this process, there were also a number of requests from media that did not specify a source. This type of request – a loose “can we speak to someone” query – put the power of selection at the sole discretion of the sport organisation. Media Manager 2 noted that journalists rarely seemed perturbed by this:

> I often ask for two to three preferences. If [major Melbourne radio station] call up and want an interview I’ll say, give me your preference order and we’ll try to get your first and if not, second or third. Sometimes it’s impossible to get any of them. But most of the time we will always try our best. It’s rare that they are angry.

This situation, while certainly not reflective of all sport journalists who attempted to gain access to sources that week, indicates that from this perspective a certain element of sport journalists are simply looking for a source for the sake of having one, rather than as a result of any notion of newsworthiness.

*Information Subsidy Justification*

As illustrated in the above quote from Media Manager 3, the professional club viewed each information subsidy as an opportunity to “achieve their own ends”. Unsurprisingly, these ends were more likely to favour the organisation, rather than the media or the public. It is important to note here that as one of the clubs in Australia’s most popular sporting competition, the sport organisation in this case is in a privileged position. The media management team explained they did not necessarily need to seek media coverage, because they were likely to receive it anyway based on their position as a team in Australia’s leading football code. While the media team pitched two stories to media outlets during the week of analysis, mostly their work involved managing media demand. Therefore, it is not surprising that this club was able to take a more strategic view of their information subsidies. When the media team was
asked to explain the reasoning behind approving certain sources for certain media opportunities, the most likely factors they identified included whether it was a positive story, whether it originated from a large media outlet and whether it had a strategic benefit to the organisation. In addition, media load was shared throughout the organisation; players might be called upon if it was their turn. A specific number of media conferences were also dictated by league policy, such as a coach mid-week and post-match conference. Newsworthiness was a less prominent consideration for the approval of access to sources. Newsworthiness was employed as a rationale for access during the week of the case study, such as a player celebrating a milestone game being selected for the Thursday media conference, however, most opportunities were organised for the club’s strategic benefit. Media Manager 3 was clear about the role the club played in setting the agenda, stating that:

> Every player opportunity that we do, it’s got to be under our control otherwise you lose control of the narrative. For example, we want to put [senior player] on AFL 360 [a popular television program] next week but we’ll wait to see after the game because if he’s had a bad game, then the questions will turn from broader issues to how he’s performing and that will set the agenda for [the coach’s] media conference and then that’s the rest of the week.

The above quote and its acknowledgement of a weekly football media narrative illustrates that the media management team are aware of the need to carefully consider the strategic benefit of each media opportunity or request before approving it, and further, that the frames selected and facilitated by the media department serve to deliberately construct a specific and controlled narrative for the club. It also perhaps alludes to the narrow focus of the AFL media cycle, in that one interview can set the agenda for the week and a minor issue could become the focus of multiple days’ worth of coverage by multiple media outlets.
There was evidence from the fieldwork that a strong relationship between a journalist and the media relations practitioner within the club could override the justification processes referred to previously. The emphasis was not necessarily on a personal relationship with the media manager, but rather the respect for the way the journalist acted in their every-day work. “Good” journalists were those that reported on the game; “bad” journalists sought salacious stories far removed from the field. This is explained in the following quote by Media Manager 1:

You respect someone who is trying to do their job. It’s usually good for the game… it’s good that there is a constant discussion about footy. It’s one of the reasons why it is above everyone else, if we don’t nourish that it’s not good for [our club] and it’s not good for the game. The coach, he gets it, don’t begrudge people who ask what’s going on the field.

That’s good, that’s what we want to talk about. That’s what you should be talking about.

The media team also provided examples of where journalists had transgressed the clubs’ accepted modes of good behaviour; mostly, where journalists had tried to bypass the media team to gain access to a player, such as attempting to interview a player as they were leaving a medical clinic. Sometimes, the transgression resulted in access to the sport organisation’s sources being denied. In this context, good journalists were understood to be those who focused on the playing of the game, while bad journalists were those who engaged more critically with the clubs and league.

The reasons for justifying access to information subsidies were clearly linked to the participants’ conceptualisation of their role. Media Manager 1 summed up his job as a counsel to senior management, while the two other media management staff, who mostly facilitated the request process, summarised their roles as presenting the club in the best possible light. Media Manager 3 said:
Media relations is a critical component, but I think it’s also not just what you don’t tell the media, but how we wish to project and present the club. And what we do, what we want that narrative to be, and then we work in conjunction with media outlets to achieve that.

The media department did not simply aim to facilitate coverage of their club, but rather aimed to facilitate a specific type of coverage that was beneficial to the organisation, and enacted this through careful consideration of access to information subsidies.

**Discussion**

While earlier research found that media releases were a critical information subsidy in sport media relations (Fortunato, 2000; Lowes, 1999), this case study reveals that a professional sport club in Australia is more likely to use direct access to sources, such as media conferences or one-on-one interviews, rather than media releases. Professional sport clubs appear to be adopting the same media management tactics as used by major international sports events (Howe, 2008; Sugden and Tomlinson, 2007). Research has established that direct access to sources is the most effective information subsidy in term of influencing the media agenda (Sweetser and Brown, 2008). In this study over 90% of media coverage exclusively contained club sources, which supports the contention that direct access to sources is a highly effective information subsidy. This case study suggests, at least in the context of the most popular and successful football code in Australia, that media relations managers have developed sophisticated methods to subsidise the media with information, and that these have been readily accepted by the media, as a result of their need to facilitate the every-day work of news production. However, this study also revealed that the acceptance of these information subsidies is perhaps because sport journalists in Australia cannot gain access to sports sources any other way.
Media access in this study was limited to official information subsidies, and was prioritised to rights-holding broadcasters and other television and radio stations that paid players to appear on their programs. For those media outlets that were not prepared to pay, the power to decide which talent they were able to access almost always resided with the media management team. While some requests were approved immediately, there was evidence that they were more likely to be approved if the request was related to a story about the game, was positive and of strategic benefit to the club. Newsworthiness was not the main consideration of media staff when determining which sources would be available via an information subsidy. That newsworthiness was not a key determinant in the request for or allocation of sources via information subsidies is not perhaps surprising given earlier research that established the primary work of sport reporting is “space-filling” (Marr et al, 1999: 119), where daily updates from designated beats are newsworthy simply because of their status as a beat (Lowes, 1999). This study provides more evidence to support the claim that newsworthiness is a secondary consideration in sport journalism.

Most importantly, this study establishes that individual, one-on-one contact with sport news sources – such as coaches and athletes – is potentially now a valuable and rare commodity. This is in contrast to Lowes’ (1999) study that described how beat reporters drew stories most often from the informal encounters that they had with coaches, players and other club staff. Lowes (1999) detailed how a National Hockey League beat reporter would spend several hours at the team’s practice facility, chatting to coaches, players and administrative staff, in order to uncover stories, and perform checks on information that came from the media relations team. Therefore, the most important finding of this study is that there appears to have been a paradigm shift in the relationship between sport journalists and their news sources, even taking into account different national, league and organisational contexts. The most valuable sports sources are still the athletes, coaches or administration staff, but sport organisations’ media management staff now control access to these sources, which ultimately empowers the organisation to seek to control the media agenda.
Sport journalists globally have raised concerns that access in professional sport has become limited to highly constructed and managed environments such as media conferences (Boyle et al., 2002; Coombs and Osborne, 2012; Grimmer and Kian, 2013; Sherwood and Nicholson, 2013; Suggs, 2015); this study provides further evidence to confirm the new sport media access model. As Sugden and Tomlinson (2007) argued of media operations at major football events, the controlled nature of these opportunities is the primary way in which the sport organisation exerts control over the news agenda:

The press briefing, the controlled conference, the control of spaces and access – all of these escalate the scale of the mediation process and consolidate the control, flow and direction of information in the interests of organising and official bodies (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2007: 58).

By limiting access to information subsidies that they control, this professional football club had significant influence over the formation and control of the subsequent media agenda. This research presents evidence for a shift away from the model of media access presented within Fortunato’s (2000) work, where providing journalists access to sources was the driving factor for sports media relations, as Philadelphia 76s former public relations director Dave Coskey noted: “It is not your job to limit, but to exploit and create as much access as you can” (Fortunato, 2000: 487). This shift is most likely due to the changes to the sport industry in the fifteen years between the two studies, but might also be due to the fact that this case study explored an average week at a professional football club in Australia, whereas Fortunato’s (2000) research examined broader strategies from the league’s perspective, or that each sport league operates in an entirely different context. Nonetheless, the results from this study suggest that the media management team employed at the club were not simply focused on gaining mainstream media coverage, for the club’s privileged position in the Australian sporting landscape ensures that media coverage is almost guaranteed. Instead, the media staff at the club aimed to satisfy the media’s demand...
for stories by providing information subsidies, and framing these information subsidies so that they optimised the benefit that would accrue to the club as a result of subsequent coverage.

Conclusion

The sophisticated nature of sport media relations presented within this paper has significant implications for sport journalism, which has previously been labelled the “toy department” of the newsroom (Rowe, 2007). While sport journalists have traditionally relied on information subsidies and strong relationships with sources to complete their every-day newswork (Lowes, 1999; Marr et al., 1999; Theberge and Cronk, 1986), this study provides evidence that professional sport organisations are assuming more control over the media agenda by actively framing their information subsidies and then controlling access to those information subsidies. This finding becomes particularly problematic when considered in conjunction with the second major observation, that journalists are not developing relationships with other sport organisation sources – such as players, coaches or administrative staff – and that their primary relationship is with the media staff. Without the ability to complete checks and balances with other sources, as evidenced in previous research (Lowes, 1999), sport journalists are left with very few alternatives other than to accept the version of reality presented to them by sport organisations.

This paper argues that sport media work is mired in a self-perpetuating cycle, largely due to the demands of its beat model, where daily news of male professional sport is required, even if there is nothing necessarily newsworthy to report. This examination of media access at a professional sport organisation in Australia provides evidence that professional clubs are able to take advantage of this sport media newswork model, by providing regular, high-quality information subsidies that facilitate newswork, but on their terms, rather than that of newsworkers. It would appear that, in this Australian case, sport journalism has been complicit in ceding control of the sport media agenda to professional sport
organisations.

There are several limitations to this study which limit the generalisability of its results. Foremost among these is that a single case study presents a valuable yet unique view of media relations practice, in this instance a professional club that has a privileged position in the sport media nexus. As such, while these results may be comparable to other teams that command major mainstream media attention, it is not likely to be representative of the media strategy at all professional sport clubs. An additional limitation of this study is that it does not include the voices of sport journalists; their inclusion would have provided insights regarding the way in which they evaluated the information subsidies delivered by the club. However, the fact that over 90% of media stories analysed contained only club sources does provide evidence that there is a limited verification processes and that information subsidies are viewed as highly valuable. Nevertheless, research that replicates this study, with the additional perspective of sport journalists, would be a valuable further contribution to the field.
References


Fink JS (2014) Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex: Have we really “come a long way, baby”? *Sport Management Review* 1–12.


*Journalism* 14(7): 942–959.


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