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IMAGINING ‘AMERICA’: THE NBA AND LOCAL–GLOBAL MEDIASCAPES

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Abstract This article concerns the role of mediated sport in local reconfigurations associated with globalization. The increasing worldwide transmission of sport raises questions regarding the cultural presence of ‘global’ sports. We combine elements of figurational sociology, cultural studies and critical political economy to examine the production and textual presence of the North American National Basketball Association (NBA) on United Kingdom television. Interviews with two media personnel were used to provide insights into the dynamics of production. Subsequent textual analysis revealed the dominant interpretive framework presented to viewers. This included the establishment of local–global hierarchy, education of local consumers, indigenous referencing, and caricatured representations of US culture. Observations regarding the nuanced complexity of the televisual discourse, and the scope for contradictory readings are made.

Key words • basketball • globalization • identity-politics • media

Sport is to the fore in local–global media encounters. As well as spanning geographical barriers, it is well placed to transcend ethnic, cultural and linguistic boundaries. Accordingly, media groups, in conjunction with corporate executives, have utilized sports broadcasting as a key commodity in penetrating global markets. Yet there is more than an economic dimension to the process; the mediation of sport acts as a transmitter of cultural values, messages and ideologies on a global scale (Maguire, 1993; Miller et al., 2001; Rowe, 1999; Whannel, 1995). As Whannel observes, ‘sport provides the ideal cultural material for global television’ (1995: 58). Hence, the increased scope of global sport transmissions raises questions regarding local–global cultural encounters.

This article investigates the place of mediasport within the shifting identity-politics and established-outsider relations associated with the local–global nexus. The interconnection between the political economy of media production and the textual presence of televised sport are considered in this analysis of the local presence of ‘global media sport’. We focus on the production and textual representation of the North American National Basketball Association (NBA) on UK television. The following questions are considered — what political economic
dynamics contextualize the positioning of the NBA on UK television; and, what is the ideological positioning of NBA programming — employing elements of critical political-economy, figurational sociology, and cultural studies. The analysis begins with a critical political-economy approach (see Golding and Murdock, 1991; Murdock and Golding, 1999) to explore the interdependence of the economic dynamics of global sports mediascapes and public discourses. This approach 'show[s] how different ways of financing and organising cultural production have traceable consequences for the range of discourses and representations in the public domain' (Golding and Murdock, 1991: 15). The dynamics of television production are explored with regard to the making of meanings surrounding the NBA in the UK, and what this reveals about established-outsider relations (Elias, 1956/1994). The theory of established-outsider relations is used to explore the local–global identity politics evident in media-sport texts.

Our approach locates sports broadcasting within the wide-ranging transformation of global media industries, outlines the conceptual and methodological issues associated with approaching global sports mediascapes, and details the contextual political-economic features of the coverage we analyse. Finally, the findings of our textual analysis are summarized in the context of wider debates concerning the local–global nexus, the media and sport.

Local–Global Sports Mediascapes

The media are viewed as a crucial facilitator of the new encounters, possibilities, and anxieties characterizing global interconnectedness (Held, 2000; Held and McGrew, 2002; Held et al., 1999). Within such processes, Morley and Robins (1995: 19) point to the hierarchies and imbalances that inform the 'new spaces of global media'. They argue: ‘[w]e are seeing the restructuring of information and image spaces and the production of a new communications geography, characterised by global networks and an international space of information flows . . . Our senses of space and place are all being significantly reconfigured’ (Morley and Robins, 1995: 1). Such encounters, they argue, facilitate the emergence of ‘new spaces of identity’ as cosmopolitanism and localism meet.

Since the 1980s, profound reconfigurations of sports broadcasting have occurred due to major regulatory, economic and technological shifts within the global media industries (Maguire, 1999; Miller et al., 2001). These developments transformed media industries and audiences (McChesney, 1998). Subsequently, the mediation of sport was characterized by a range of new services, delivery systems, and forms of payment. These shifts stimulated the emergence of dedicated sports channels, satellite and cable distribution networks, and pay-per-view and subscription methods. National sports media markets have subsequently been reconfigured as existing structures and institutions have been surpassed, transformed or accommodated within the transnational features of the ‘new media order’ (Morley and Robins, 1995; Murdock and Golding, 1999).

Thus, global sport is intimately entwined with global media communications economies. As Miller et al. (2001) note, sport has been a crucial commodity in the transformation of the media industries. Specifically, because of its wide and
cross-cultural appeal, sport occupies a prominent place in the broadcasting schedules of media producers and distributors seeking global audiences (Maguire, 1999; Rowe, 1999; Whitson, 1998). The effective use of the media to create interest by ‘educating’ consumers to familiarize them with sporting brands and build identification is central in this regard. As with wider global processes, there is a great deal of asymmetry. Certain kinds of sport emerge, privileged as ‘global media sports’ over others in the quest for audiences (Maguire, 1993).

Several sports have been particularly successful in enlarging their media spaces and markets through television broadcasting. For example, English Premier League Association Football is currently broadcast in 152 countries (www.premierleague.com). Meanwhile, National Basketball Association (NBA) 2002–03 programming was broadcast in 42 different languages reaching a global audience of 750 million households, which can be seen in 212 countries around the world (www.nba.com). Similarly, Major League Baseball (MLB) claims a worldwide scope of ‘224 countries and territories’ (Major League Baseball, 2001). The 2004 Athens Olympics, in turn, were watched by an estimated cumulative total of 3.9 billion people in 220 countries and territories: making them the most accessed in history, and the most watched sporting event in the world at that time (IOC, 2004). Although the claims of sporting transnationals should be met with caution,3 the market domination and extensive reach of such ‘global brands’ highlight the imbalance of local–global cultural encounters, raising questions of reception, interpretation and resistance (Maguire, 1999).

Concerns regarding the concentration of media ownership as a threat to social democracy, diversity and the ‘public good’ have been frequently aired (Alger, 1998; Golding, 1998; Herman and McChesney, 1997; Murdock and Golding, 1999; Parker, 2000). Despite corporate rhetoric propounding greater ‘consumer choice’ there have been concerns about a narrowing of the breadth of output. Sports broadcasting is also subject to such transformations. For example, English independent television producer Rupert Rumney comments on the textual impacts of global sports broadcasting:

There is a part of me that says sports broadcasting will make us all into morons . . . I am concerned about the kind of television that SKY and Star produce. It is bright visually, but it has no subtlety and no intellectual content whatsoever. If you watch SKY or Star you will see the same thing over and over again . . . The nature of international broadcasting now is to throw out everything that makes something interesting and make it as bland as possible. Watch the sports programme that goes out on Channel Four [Transworld Sport] . . . and listen to the script. They will never use a complicated word or complicated construction of a sentence because it’s going to be dubbed into 40 languages. That cuts out all possibility of nuance or humour or subtlety in what you say. Everything has to be simplified. (Cited in Holland, 1997: 148)

Rumney’s observations capture the way wider political-economic shifts may impact on sports broadcasting textually. Specifically, he captures the way that production standards, style and ‘pitch’ of programming may be altered to generate ‘global appeal’. Such reflections have long been made by sociologists of sport and media researchers (Maguire, 1990; Whannel, 1992).

The global mediasport economy is also characterized by multi-directional flows. While certain media sports dominate, various ‘brands’ — both global and local in scope — compete for consumers, and generate and mobilize complex and
co-existing discourses of cosmopolitanism and localism. There is ample evidence of the scope for global sports broadcasting to generate geographically diverse audiences, fandoms and forms of identification (e.g. Andrews et al, 1996; Ben-Porat, 2000, Farred, 2002; Nash, 2000). In turn, discourses of national and local identities can be reinforced within sports coverage at the local level, whilst simultaneously being projected on a global scale. In other words, the local/national is entwined with the global, and the latter sometimes reinvigorates the local and intensifies the national (e.g. Andrews et al., 1996; Jackson and Andrews, 1996, 1999; Rowe, 2003; Silk and Andrews, 2001).

**Conceptualizing the Global Sports-Media Nexus**

Conceptualizations of the local–global sports nexus have taken a variety of forms. These tend to be formulated in dichotomous, uni-directional terms. For example on the one hand Whitson (1998), invoking notions of global ‘circuits of promotion’, speculates that sports are increasingly detached from place attachments and loyalties in favour of discourses premised upon personal and consumer choice. On the other hand, Rowe has recently argued that ‘sport’s compulsive attachment to the production of national difference may, instead, constitutively repudiate the embrace of the global’ (2003: 292). That is, conceptualizations oscillate between conceptions of cosmopolitan consumer identification devoid of national and local significance, to that where precisely such symbolism is seen as paramount in the resonance of sport to the exclusion of globality. We seek to steer a path between mono-dimensional and/or dichotomous thinking in order to explore how the local/national and global are entwined. This position has been evident in wider globalization debates (Robertson, 1995). Our stance draws on figurational concepts and elements of cultural studies approaches to media analysis. In this article we foreground such concepts within a critical political economy approach. In doing so we conceive of the countervailing nature of global sport as neither totalizing nor rejecting of the ‘global’; rather these are viewed as interrelated in complex and nuanced ways.

Theoretical speculation, in the context of the local–global mediascape, of course requires empirical grounding. Specifically, the interplay between cosmopolitan identification and the significance of local and national affiliations needs teasing out. As Morley and Robins (1995) point out, ‘new’ media logics premised upon global economic processes encounter entrenched local and national markets, affiliations and discourses. In this regard, nuanced and sophisticated analyses of the local–global interplay are necessary to interpret the significance and meanings of global interconnectedness.

Specifically, it is necessary to comprehend the nature of global sports broadcasting at the textual level in the context of the local–global nexus. The increased scale of global broadcasting highlights the capacity for the circulation of discourses concerning people, places and identities to be conveyed through sports coverage — sports broadcasting as ‘cultural text’. Although media texts do not possess the capacity to dictate what audiences think, they do hold the potential to construct agendas, frame issues within certain parameters, and impose and re-
inforce hierarchies, while simultaneously cutting off alternative interpretations. That is, they deploy discourses that usually cohere with dominant ideologies.

Previous research has noted the role of mediated sport texts in the production and reproduction of dominant social relations. Local–global interdependence has largely been approached through analyses of international sports competition, such as the Olympic Games, focusing on the reproduction of ideologies of nationalism (e.g. Hargreaves, 1992; Real et al., 1989; Riggs et al., 1993; Rowe and Lawrence, 1986; Tomlinson, 1989; Tudor, 1992). This study is concerned with the articulation of local and global relationships through locally broadcast global (but not international) sport. Our observations shed light on the scope for mediated sport to construct and convey local–global ‘messages’ beyond the explicitly oppositional medium of international sports competition.

Global Sport, Political Economy and Media Analysis

Mediated sport has largely been conceived of as a ‘communicative chain’ featuring three levels: production; messages or codes and content; and audience reception/consumption (Whannel, 2000). Conceptually, Gruneau et al. (1988) point out there are limitations to a rigid linear production-text-consumption model of media analysis, particularly when the analysis seeks to infer observations of one sphere from, or to, another. Alternatively, they advocate the need to think of a ‘circuit’ of cultural production and circulation. Within this model, televisual discourse is seen as passing through three distinctive, yet linked, moments, each of which ‘retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence’ (Hall, 1980: 128). Thus, through the circulation of discourse, ‘production’ becomes ‘reproduction’ to become ‘production’ again. Meanings and messages are always produced; first, by the encoder from the ‘raw’ material of everyday life; and second, by the audience in relation to its location in other discourses (Storey, 1996). Such a conception, crucially, attunes analyses to the link between ‘moments’, thus overcoming tendencies to treat them in isolation.

Method

Here, we conduct a textual analysis informed by a critical political economy approach to production, concerned with ‘explain[ing] how the economic dynamics of production structure public discourse by promoting certain cultural forms over other’ (Golding and Murdock, 1991: 27). The approach allows researchers to make connections between the financing and organization of cultural production and changes in the field of public discourse and representation in a non-reducible way that respects the need for an analysis of textual organization (Golding and Murdock, 1991).

First, the relations of production of the NBA on UK television are examined, drawing on two face-to-face interviews with individuals in the key groups involved in production and broadcasting — Mike Milne, of the independent production company Chrysalis Television, who produced the NBA ’99 programming, and Paul Smith, NBA (London) media officer. Semi-structured interviews
were used to explore the themes initially considered significant in their operations, and to allow unanticipated topics to emerge. Given the limited data available from these two sources, cautious interpretations are made about the production of the NBA on UK television.

Second, the underlying structural principles of programming are considered. This approach explores the scope for transformations involving narrativization, personalization, hierarchization, and immediacy, to position meanings within dominant ideological discourses. The composition and ‘movement’ of programming; the imposition of ‘codes’ which selectively highlight certain aspects of events; the underlying connotations of the construction of coverage; and, the ‘anchoring’ effects of commentary in producing meanings are each considered, situating televised sport within wider circulation as meaningful discourse.

Broadcast samples were taken during 1999 NBA coverage on Independent Television (ITV) broadcast throughout the UK. Prevalent themes that informed issues of local–global identity politics were operationalized to provide consistency in the subsequent analysis of programming. Systematic observations were made, on a data-recording template, of: the context of the example within the programme; relevant technical conventions, such as camera angles, shots, and use of slow-motion; audio information, including commentary from studio or game commentators, player/coach interviews and comments; and visual information — including all that was visible on the screen, such as graphics. The results are presented following an outline of the political-economic relations of production that underlie UK programming.

The Political Economy of the NBA on UK Television

Within the emergent sport-media-corporate nexus, characterized by the quest for expansion to global markets, the NBA has been a prominent player (e.g. Andrews, 1997; Andrews et al., 1996; Emerson, 1993; Falcous and Maguire, 2005; Jackson and Andrews, 1996, 1999). As Andrews notes, while its presence is multifaceted, for the NBA, ‘television coverage [is] the primary vehicle for engaging, and indeed constituting, overseas markets’ (1999: 506–07). The majority of this broadcasting takes the form of pre-packaged highlights shows designed to promote the league to new consumers (Emerson, 1993). These shows follow overwhelmingly similar formats: a ‘magazine’ style highlights package; youth oriented disposition; and, fast-cut presentational styles. Notwithstanding this consistency of representation, Andrews notes, ‘the particular signification and experience of America [via NBA coverage] . . . is necessarily contingent upon the uniqueness of local contexts’ (1999: 508). In terms of production, the local conditions of the television market during the late 1990s are significant for the purposes of this study in evaluating the textual presence of the NBA in the UK.

The relations of production that underpinned broadcasting of NBA basketball on UK television in 1999 consisted of an interdependent network involving the NBA, broadcasters, and production company (see Figure 1). Subsequently, the textual presence of the NBA emerges from this political-economic network in which various groups adopted strategies coherent with their institutional objec-
tives. Awareness of these complexities is significant in order to understand the scope for positioning and representation in coverage, and to avoid a monolithic approach to understanding the global sports mediascape.

These relations of production emerged as the NBA sought expansion to the UK during the mid-1990s. NBA coverage first appeared on UK television on the subscription based satellite channel, BSKYB during the 1994–5 season. The following season, NBA programming was presented on terrestrial television (Channel 4). Crucially, such free-to-air programmes were open to a much larger audience than the subscription-based satellite broadcasts. Paul Smith, the NBA’s London media officer, noted the significance for UK market penetration: ‘. . . that was a key thing for us, we need that wide exposure . . .’. However, the specifics of the UK market were significant in forcing a departure from the usual NBA broadcasting strategies:

...[in] most other territories the NBA makes programmes, like one hour edits or NBA Action, which is a thirty minutes highlight reel which is sent directly to [local broadcasters] ... we’re kind of different ... because the UK market is different you need something that reflects the quality of television in the UK which is very, very high, and we have our own little nuances of what the British audience want to see. So we’re a little different. (Smith interview)

As a result, the NBA engaged in agreements with broadcasters that were significant in contextualizing their subsequent presence within the UK market. Specifically, these political-economic interdependencies were important in shaping the textual presentation in several ways.

Channel 4’s NBA coverage, commissioned from the independent production company Chrysalis Television, featured upbeat presentation styles, spectacular game action, vivid images of US cities, handheld camera work to lend ‘authenticity’, slang terminology, and lifestyle features set to a backdrop of rap and hip-hop music. As Chrysalis producer Mike Milne explained, the channels’ target audience was crucial in this regard: ‘it was ... the vernacular that you would hear on the street, it was tightly focused to a teenage audience ... we wanted the 14–18 year old to say “yeah, I know what 24/7 is, and my Dad doesn’t!”’ So that was very narrow-
cast in many ways, which allowed us to explore those kind of rhythms.’ Hence, the programming was generationally exclusionary in its ‘pitch’. Such an orientation conforms both to the NBA’s targeting of youth — their primary overseas market (Andrews, 1999), and to Channel 4’s licence restrictions which require the presentation of ‘alternative content’ to mainstream broadcasters.

Channel 4 owned the copyright, notionally giving them sole editorial control of programme content. However, illustrating the dialogue regarding the content and disposition of programming, NBA representative Smith described the exchange between the two organizations: “We had Chrysalis in over the summer . . . talking about where the programme should go? What we should change? What we should add? What we like? It’s kind of an ongoing process really, we’re both trying to make the programming look the best it can.’ The NBA’s actions to seek programme content conforming to its commercial strategies, target markets and brand image went beyond the production company, to direct dialogue between the NBA and the broadcaster on issues such as time-slot allocation:

We work with Channel 4 on where we would like to be. That’s been an ongoing process over the last two or three years . . . we kind of say ‘we would like this’, or ‘this is our optimum’ and then we work with them. We maybe put in three options and they say ‘we can’t do it here, how about this!’ It’s very much a working together.

Smith’s comments here illustrate NBA attempts to leverage the most favourable time-slots according to their target market. Yet, the negotiation with broadcasters’ scheduling priorities and audience targeting is clear.

In 1999 Independent Television (ITV) — the mainstream commercial terrestrial channel — acquired broadcast rights, and broadcast the 1999, 2000 and 2001 seasons. Mach 1, a company formed from a partnership between United Broadcasting, then owners of two ITV licenses (Meridian and Anglia), and Chrysalis, produced NBA programming for ITV. Initially the programme, NBA ‘99, was broadcast throughout the UK on Saturday lunchtime following the association football magazine show On the Ball.

The shift to a mainstream commercial broadcaster had a marked impact on the textual presence of the NBA, for three reasons. First, the remit of the broadcaster — Chrysalis producer, Mike Milne, explained:

when ITV picked up the contract . . . they said ‘we don’t want the vernacular, we don’t want the hip-hop, we don’t want the kind of trendiness of it — we want it to be nice and easy to understand;’ [The] ITV network have to sell it to the regions in order to get a network slot, so people like Granada and LWT [regional broadcast franchises] need the comfort of knowing that the programme will deliver a reasonable rating so they can sell their advertising. (Milne interview, our emphasis)

Second, ‘the cost [budget] was a fraction of what Channel 4 was . . . so that had a massive bearing on what we could do and what we can’t do’ (Milne interview). Production options were subsequently constrained. Third, whereas previously Channel 4 had owned the copyright, ITV co-owned the copyright with the NBA. This was significant in shaping programme content: ‘the protections in place restrict what we can and can’t actually do . . . as a marketing company they [the NBA] are very keen to place product, their image etc., etc. So they will do what they can to get players saying ‘hello, you’re watching ITV’ and give you all
these things’ (Milne interview). However, although the NBA were able to formally leverage input within the production process, their wishes were sometimes in conflict with the production values of the producer:

they like to have their products as prominent as possible . . . they feel strongly about trying to promote players in it. They tend to come in saying 'we’ve got these great ideas' But in my view they’re marketing ideas and not television ideas — two different things. (Milne interview, our emphasis)

These comments demonstrate the scope for disjuncture between NBA ‘branding’ desires and the craft and artistic considerations of television production professionals. In practice, Milne explained: ‘we make a decision about whether it’s something we feel strongly about or something that we don’t.’ Milne also revealed the tensions between the NBA and the producer over portrayal of the more controversial features of the league:

. . . in the past, we’ve not pulled so many punches — like Barkley against Shaq — that fight; if we ask for that [footage] they do get a bit stroppy [angry] and say, ‘we shouldn’t be giving you this, why do you want it?’ And they’ll often say, ‘no you can’t have it’, and it can get a bit tense, because I’ll say ‘well, I must have it, because I have to report this — it’s in all the papers — you look bad by not giving it, it’s far better to give us that . . . ’ You see Brian’s [Barwick — Head of ITV Sport] view is that that’s entertaining, and it’s all publicity. Their view is that it shows it in a bad light . . . I mean, we have this problem every time we show New York and Miami — they love a brawl . . . and that is the selling point — you know — another fight in Madison Square Garden!

This example illustrates the limitations on the NBA’s ability to control its image on the basis of the political-economic alignments of television production and varying institutional priorities. Milne reveals both his own desire to cover the issue on the basis of an ethos of journalistic reportage as a media producer, and the broadcaster’s wish to cover the fight on the basis of the potential audience ratings and the interest the controversial spectacle will provide. Notably, both are in conflict with NBA desires to control (and sanitize) the portrayal of their ‘brand’. 

The desire to provide attractive television is thus shaped by a range of imperatives. The media spectacle being produced is an example of a mediated mimetic activity and reflects the desire of media personnel to put on a ‘good show’. While such mediated forms vary considerably across the globe, both in terms of their intensity and style, they do have basic common structural characteristics. They provide a ‘make-believe’ setting that allows emotions to flow more easily, imitating the excitement produced by real-life situations. Excitement is elicited by the creation of tensions, not all of which the NBA would wish broadcast.

Given these structural characteristics, the manner in which the quest for enjoyable excitement finds expression in media sport varies by location. Local traditions are maintained and local meanings attached to ‘glocalized’ media sport products. The NBA and British basketball media products are no exception. The quest for exciting significance is bound up in a series of identity politics and established-outsider power relations that contour the character of the global sport experience. Media sports thus involve the quest, not simply for unreflective excitement, but also for exciting significance. The commodified forms of pleasure provided by global media companies lend important insights into the production and consumption of the controlled decontrolling of emotions. This
case study provides preliminary insights into how mimetic needs and interests are produced and consumed in UK media coverage of NBA basketball.

The Milne and Smith interviews show that the NBA text on UK television emerges in a complex way from the political-economic interdependencies affecting production. First, the NBA’s strategies, informed by a desire for exposure and ‘branding’ to targeted UK audiences are clearly significant. They actively lobbied both broadcaster and producer to convey their brand(s) as they deemed desirable. Second, the activities and role of the broadcaster — initially Channel 4, and subsequently ITV — are significant in shaping the programming they commission from the production company. For example, the transition between broadcaster (Channel 4 and ITV) had a profound impact upon the demographic targeting of programming. Furthermore, Channel 4 and ITV’s commercial strategies mediate the positioning of the NBA — evident for example in time-slot allocation and promotional levels. Third, the production company also mediates the representation of the NBA. Several elements shape the texts produced by media personnel: the professional craft and artistic elements of television production designed to produce mimetic excitement; an ethos of ‘journalese’; the remit of the commissioning broadcaster; and, their own commercial constraints. These observations concerning the media-basketball industry help to contextualize the following interpretations of NBA ‘99 as a ‘cultural text’.

Textual representation, set in the context of the shifting relations of production and broadcasting, was analysed in ITV broadcasts produced by Mach 1. The half-hour, ‘magazine’ format programmes were anchored in a UK studio by former model, Beverly Turner, and former UK 400m runner, Derek Redmond. Programming consisted of highlights of two featured games with US commentary; NBA High Flyers, featuring a ‘star’ player profile; Destination NBA, focusing on a US city; NBA Shorts, featuring a weekly ‘round-up’; and, ‘plays of the week’ which closed the show. As Gruneau et al note, such studio-based and pre-packaged formats ‘allow for a higher degree of mediation’ (1988: 274). This observation is borne out in the analysis, revealing numerous examples of coverage as encoded ‘cultural text’.

Imagining ‘America’: Global Meets Local

Basketball coverage carried with it representations of people, places and identities drawing upon, and informing local–global identity politics in numerous ways. In informing local–global discourses there was a high degree of transference between narrative themes as detailed below.

Global Hierarchy and Local Concession

Premised on the need to attract audiences, textual constructions centred upon establishing the credibility of the NBA to UK viewers. In local–global terms this required textual and narrative strategies to confer status and prestige upon the NBA — largely unknown to mainstream UK audiences. Subsequently, a consistent theme was the construction of a local–global hierarchy that placed the NBA in a
pre-eminent position. The opening sequence of the series attempted to establish the 'world class' status of the NBA in comparison to selected 'local' sports:

Turner: Welcome to the NBA on ITV.
Redmond: Right through until the NBA finals in June, you can follow all the excitement, the passion, the skill and the glamour of the best basketball league in the world, here on NBA 99.
Turner: And, if you're new to basketball, don't worry, it's easy to understand and it's brilliant to watch.
Redmond: In fact, I'm so into this sport I would have swapped all experiences like this [video sequence — World Athletics Championships, Men's 4 x 400m relay, 1991] and all my medals, just to play one week in the NBA. (NBA '99, 13/02/99)

Notable in this sequence, alongside the positioning of the NBA as the apex of a global sporting hierarchy, is the diminution of local alternatives by comparison. Similar examples of the subordination of local sports and the consequent evaluation of the NBA were apparent throughout the series. One show opened:

Turner: What a wicked weekend for sports fans, there's the speed of Formula One from Australia . . .
Redmond: Or the power of international rugby in the Five Nations . . .
Turner: Or there's the glamour of the quarter finals of the FA Cup — how big is that?
Redmond: but there's one sport that has got it all — speed, power and glamour.
Turner: it's the NBA, here on ITV. (NBA '99, 06/03/99, emphasis added)

Consequently, alongside the synergetic promotion of ITV sports programming for that particular weekend, the narration challenges established-outsider relations in UK sports hierarchies. Additionally the positioning of the NBA confounds the cultural marginality of basketball in the UK. Long-standing apathy/intransigence toward the apparently uncouth and unsophisticated sport of basketball is entwined with the sport's specifically US signification (cf. Barnett, 1990; Maguire, 1988). In this regard, programming generates precisely those challenges to established local identities heralded by globalization.

Conferring world-class status on the NBA was central to attempts to establish credibility with UK audiences (perceived to be) lacking knowledge of both the NBA, and basketball more broadly. 'Educational' elements in the coverage took several forms, with particular emphasis on the rules, positions and strategies of basketball:

Turner: In basketball there are traditional positions that players adopt, just like in football, there are two that are easy to spot, the point guard and the centre — the smallest and the tallest in the team . . .
Redmond: This is Utah's point guard John Stockton [cuts to sequence], he is the creator of the team, like a midfield general in football — Beckham or Redknapp — the point-guard brings the ball up court . . . (NBA '99, 27/02/99)

Hence, positional specializations are introduced by use of 'local' comparisons with two English footballers which acts as a 'familiar' template for UK viewers to understand and interpret the NBA. Throughout the NBA '99 series, these comparisons were provided exclusively through reference to English Association Football teams and players:
Redmond: Each team has two forwards, you can easily spot them because they will either weave their way through the crowd or drive to the basket.

Turner: But, what’s the difference, well, there’s a small forward and a power forward — small forwards are like Michael Owen, power forwards are like Dion Dublin. (NBA '99, 06/03/99)

Redmond: . . . the Utah Jazz are a smart veteran team, who play a very methodical and simple brand of basketball, they shoot well they pass well, and they play very tough defence — think Arsenal, but they haven’t won a title yet.

Turner: The Los Angeles Lakers have huge potential, their style is pure flash and total excitement, at any moment they can have you leaping out of your seat — these Hollywood heroes are the Chelsea of basketball. (NBA ’99, 13/02/99, emphases added)

These strategies are interrelated with aspects of the political economy of production described previously — notably, the need to ‘capture’ audience share. As noted, the scheduled time followed a football (soccer) ‘magazine’ show. Producer, Mike Milne, explained ‘that allowed us to kind of make some different decisions about the way we’d introduce people, because obviously Saturday lunchtime in sport is primarily interested in football . . . so it allowed us to draw some parallels with that’ (Milne interview). Milne’s comments here reveal the way as a producer he drew upon established local sport content to construct programming which would engage and be understandable to audiences. Thus, education about the NBA occurred in ‘preferred’ or dominant ways to capture the UK audience. It is notable that ‘indigenous referencing’ drew only on English football representing, in the context of the UK-wide audience, a relatively narrow frame of reference that reinforces both national (anglo-centric) and sporting (football-centric) hierarchies. Furthermore, it reveals the local ‘concessions’ necessary to ‘sell’ the outsider NBA in established UK contexts.

The perceived lack of accessibility of the NBA to UK viewers was reinforced in the strategy of complementing the US game commentary, which came direct from the US feed. An example, taken from a heavily edited Sacramento Kings versus Los Angeles Lakers game, illustrates this strategy:

Redmond: Early on the power of Shaquille gave LA the lead, but Sacramento quickly hit back.

US Commentator: Jason Williams, pulls up at the left elbow — he fires — heeee hits the bucket, and the Kings take the lead.

US Commentator 2: Webber having himself a very good start to this basketball game, and there’s two more — double figures for C. Webber.

US Commentator: Webber, outside the paint, isolated for the Kings, hurls the pass to the corner — three point attempt — GOOOOOD, for Peja Stojakovic.

US Commentator: Kings break out now — they’ve got a five on two transition, cross-court feed — Jason to Stojakovic — he rocks, he fires for three — He’s got the triple.

US Commentator: To Jason Williams — rainbow for three — it draws rain, and the Arco crowd explodes to its feet.

Redmond: In the second quarter Jason Williams continued to show off his versatile game, by first making the long range pass that led to an easy basket, and then, keeping with the long range theme, he hit a shot from deep behind the three-point line. (NBA ’99, 20/03/99)

In this way, specifically US basketball nomenclature — ‘the bucket’, ‘the triple’, ‘rainbow for three’, etc. — was interpreted and explained for UK audiences.

In summary, several strategies were used to capture UK audiences and engender excitement: ‘educational’ features; indigenous reference points; and the reinterpretation of US commentaries. As we have revealed, these textual representations are entwined with the political economy of production. Notably the
discourse they convey, while seeking to be hierarchical in local–global terms, is complex. That is, while they seek to reinforce the global as pre-eminence over the local, local ‘concessions’ are necessary. In UK terms, the NBA is the outsider that seeks established status. Through these strategies a series of local hierarchies, sporting and national, were reinforced by the emphasis on English football, while also exposing the contradictions in global sports media. Specifically, NBA coverage confounded the marginal cultural presence of basketball in the UK. Thus, global sports media can simultaneously challenge and impose hierarchies.

Presenting ‘America’: Stereotypes and Geography Lessons

Coverage of the NBA in the UK featured ‘insights’ into US culture and the significance of the NBA in certain cities. An example of this was evident during a feature on the Minnesota Timberwolves. The sequence opened with the graphic ‘MINNEAPOLIS, MN’, followed by a montage of shots of busy freeways, downtown skyline shots, urban vistas, snow and ice, the Mall of America, the Target Center, in-stadium shots of a carnivalesque crowd, and cheerleaders; with the following narrative:

Welcome to the mid-west — Minnesota, the land of 10,000 lakes, the weather here is cold, very cold, so if you want to keep warm, do as the locals do — go shopping. Minnesota has the nation’s biggest shopping Mall, the Mall of America, and you can shop yourself sick in its five hundred stores. Life here is tranquil and calm in that wholesome middle-America kind of way. One thing that does make the locals flip their lids a bit is the Minnesota Timberwolves. Nicknamed the T-Wolves, because Timber-Wolves are found in Minnesota, these young pups just ooze talent and may one day be the future of the NBA. . . . (NBA ’99, 27/02/99, emphases added)

The feature selectively presents images of Minnesota (and the US more broadly) with representations of consumer culture, conservative values and ways of life, and the importance of consuming basketball for local people. In this dominant ‘reading’ of ‘America’, the NBA is portrayed as an important component of US culture, and in the lives of Minnesotans. Several cities were profiled throughout the series, making explicit links between the location of featured games, the (caricatured) characteristics of US culture, and the NBA (Table 1).

The cultural terrain of the NBA is thus presented to UK audiences through selectively constructed images and stereotypes: San Antonio is linked to ‘bucking broncos and stetson hats’; Philadelphia with ‘Rocky’ and ‘brotherly love’; Boston with the TV programme Cheers; and Orlando with a desirable climate. The stereotypes of people, culture and history provide narrow interpretations of the US that are familiar to UK audiences (e.g. Orlando as a desirable holiday destination).

The explicit link between local context and culture and the NBA was further reinforced by use of a large map of the US in the studio-based sequences. For example, the sequence leading into the Minneapolis feature involved presenters in front of the map, with the following dialogue:

Turner: As difficult to beat as Arsenal, many people fancy Utah to win it all this year, but first they’ll have to fight off some tough local competition in the mid-west division.
Redmond: Look out for . . . the manic and unpredictable Minnesota Timberwolves.
Turner: But where is Minnesota? Well, stick a pin in the middle of the US, travel north, and you won’t be too far away. (NBA ’99, 27/02/99).
Turner then sticks a large pin in the map at the location of Minneapolis. This example highlights three aspects of the representation of local cultural context: first, the map reinforces the geographical context of the NBA as distinct to the viewer; second, there is an implicit assumption that the viewer is unaware of the location of US cities; third, the reference to Arsenal demonstrates the recurrent use of local (English) cultural references.

The only ‘British’ player in the league at the time, Michael Olowakandi, provided the opportunity to convey explicit themes regarding local–global relationships. Coverage focused on ‘British’ interests in the NBA in order to seek resonance with local audiences (although Olowakandi is largely unknown in the UK). This culminated in an interview with Redmond during an on-location show:

Redmond: We caught up with the Kandi man to see how he’s living life large here in LA, why don’t we check this out?
Redmond: First of all Michael . . . as a present we bought you some tea from England, because you’ve got to be missing that sort of thing?
Olowakandi: Tea from Harrods — there’s my favourite right there . . . I was actually born in Nigeria, moved over to England when I was about three and lived there ever since . . . [draft pick sequence] . . . The money’s definitely made life a whole lot more comfortable.
Redmond: Can I be rude and ask the sort of figures that it involves?
Olowakandi: Well, a lot of zeros.
Redmond: ‘a lot of zeros’

Table 1  Destination NBA — Local Images Presented

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Images and stereotypes</th>
<th>Local cultural representations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minneapolis, MN</td>
<td>10,000 Lakes, butter, pop-star ‘formerly known as Prince’, cold weather, shopping — Mall of America</td>
<td>conspicuous consumption, tranquility, ‘wholesome’ values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>The Windy City, Al Capone, Sears Tower, ‘massive corporate business’</td>
<td>celebrity interest, coolness, big hearted fans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York, NY</td>
<td>‘kickin’ and in yer face’, Urban Jungle, mecca of street style, ‘city that never sleeps’</td>
<td>vibrancy, loyalty and pride, celebrity interest, diehard celebrity fans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston, TX</td>
<td>oil rich, US Space Programme ‘nerve centre’</td>
<td>decadence, wealth, hi-tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orlando, FL</td>
<td>Sunshine State, ‘holiday hotspot’, amusement parks, fun</td>
<td>amenable climate, highly desirable destination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
<td>Boston tea-party, Harvard University, Cheers, ‘strange’ accents</td>
<td>faithful fans, proud heritage, historic roots, loyalty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle, WA</td>
<td>hip, happening, rain ‘by the bucketload’, grunge: Nirvana and Pearl Jam</td>
<td>trendsetting, fans love of basketball, demand for tickets, eager consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Antonio, TX</td>
<td>bucking broncos and stetson hats, hot and dry, laid back</td>
<td>local excitement about basketball, fervent support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Turner then sticks a large pin in the map at the location of Minneapolis. This example highlights three aspects of the representation of local cultural context: first, the map reinforces the geographical context of the NBA as distinct to the viewer; second, there is an implicit assumption that the viewer is unaware of the location of US cities; third, the reference to Arsenal demonstrates the recurrent use of local (English) cultural references.

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Redmond: Can I be rude and ask the sort of figures that it involves?
Olowakandi: Well, a lot of zeros.
Redmond: ‘a lot of zeros’
Olowakandi: A whole lot of zeros, more zeros than I’ve ever seen in my life. [game sequences/discussion of his team, the Clippers]
Redmond: What do you miss about home?
Olowakandi: I miss all my friends, all those early memories, life is good here, I’m doing something I enjoy doing, I’m doing something I love doing, I miss the simplicity, the simple lifestyle, the less in your face attitude, I miss that a lot and I try to go home every summer.
Redmond: Well thanks for . . . talking to us. (NBA ’99, 17/04/99)

The sardonic presentation of Harrods tea reinforces perceived cultural difference between Britain (conflated as England in this case) and the US, made on the basis of a crude, caricatured national stereotype; the discussion of salary links notions of wealth and decadence with the NBA and US culture; and, cultural differences are emphasized in the final section of the interview in which Olowokandi contrasts the ‘simplicity and simple lifestyles’ of ‘home’ with the ‘in your face attitude’ of the US. This comparison of ‘ways of life’ reinforces stereotypes of materialism, consumption, and wealth in the US, a ‘land of opportunity’, contrasted with stereotypes of the UK as ‘slower paced’.

These explicit representations of the US informed local–global identity politics in a series of ways. The ‘Americanness’ of the NBA was reinforced by highlighting the social and cultural contexts of teams, and conveying dominant readings of the US to UK audiences. Such narrative and visual features are symptomatic of ‘televisural tourism’, that is, discursive constructions ‘which trade on the familiar forms and sights of the national cultural heritage’ (Golding and Murdock, 1991: 27). This caricatured, selective construction of the US narrows the field of discourse, and inhibits a full engagement with the complexity and ambiguities of the national condition (Murdock, 1989). These observations highlight the capacity for global sports broadcasting, beyond international sports oppositions, to convey selective representations of peoples, places and identities. Such representations inform established-outsider identity politics in ways that are neither simplistic nor uniform. As we have highlighted, they may also be ambiguous and nuanced in local–global terms.

Conclusions: Global Sports Mediascapes and Local Cultures

The textual positioning observed in this study arises from the coalescence of the commercial and institutional desires of broadcaster, producer and the NBA to achieve success in the UK market. Central to this interdependence is attracting local audiences, which necessitated strategies of education, enticement and the construction of excitement and local resonance. The NBA was presented as a credible and desirable commodity within the global sports marketplace, and the textual constructions invite cosmopolitan identification with US basketball from UK audiences.

The impacts of the political-economic dynamics underpinning media texts take significance in the context of established — outsider identity politics associated with the dynamic local–global nexus. Central to attempts to attract UK audiences were textual and narrative strategies designed to establish the credibility of the NBA, ‘educate’ the audience, and seek local resonance through the presence of a migrant player. These strategies informed established-outsider relations in com-
plex ways: first, to establish the NBA as superior in the global sports market place to local alternatives, programming sought to generate local–global hierarchy; second, ‘indigenous referencing’ reinforced local — namely, anglo-centric, and football-centric hierarchies; and third, to convey the significance of basketball in the US, NBA coverage presented caricatured, simplistic and sanitized motifs.

These observations demonstrate the scope of sports coverage to inform the established-outsider relations characteristic of globalization. The model can be applied to a broad range of stratification phenomena, including ethnic/race issues, class struggles, gender relations, and indeed relations at a global level which acknowledge the fundamental importance of power differentials in society. Such differentiation is multidimensional in character and finds expression in people’s self-esteem and images of others. Status, prestige, power, and control underpin established-outsider relations: without hegemonic control, the claim to higher status and the specific charisma of a particular sport and nation (the NBA and the USA) would have no basis.

Power differentials of this kind generate contrasts between group charisma and group stigma — established groups enjoy the former, while outsiders suffer the latter. Established groups are better able both to organize, within specific zones of prestige, their high status public image while at the same time constructing a negative image of outsider groups. This uneven balance of power — at local, national, and global levels — is the decisive condition for any effective stigmatization of an outsider group. Accordingly, dominant reflections of both US and UK culture(s), both national contexts characterized by complex heterogeneity, are reinforced in NBA coverage. The NBA seeks established status in global terms. Yet, the political economy of UK media production, and the dynamics of global ideological exchange, moderate their strategies. This study shows that the selling of the global involves ‘concessions’ to the local. These findings confirm the assertion that, no matter how apparently powerful the global, it is obliged to negotiate with the local, especially when the ‘local’ is a former ‘super power’ with a well-established media industry.

The data should not be interpreted to mean that local and global issues in televised NBA basketball are straightforward; there is nothing monolithic or uni-dimensional about the processes involved. Although ‘dominant’ connoted meanings have been highlighted, representations can be nuanced and at times contradictory in local–global contexts. For example, coverage celebrating the NBA also featured elements that created the potential for oppositional ‘readings’ by UK audiences. For example, a feature on Alan Iverson of the Philadelphia 76ers narrated:

Turner: Philly’s defensive performance would even have made George Graham proud, but I think he’d freak at Alan Iverson’s wages!
Redmond: Alan Iverson is a rebellious player to look out for . . . he’s easily spot-able by his flashy funky hairstyle and his BA — bad attitude. (NBA ’99, 06/03/99)

These comments (with ‘indigenous referencing’ to George Graham, a Scottish football coach renowned for his defensive strategies) are notable first, by reference to the amount Iverson earns in comparison to local equivalents; and second, by mention of Iverson’s hairstyle and attitude. These open the potential for oppo-
sitional readings associated with, apparently overpaid, pretentious and non-conforming (Black) American athletes. The US player is framed, to overwhelmingly white audiences, through an implicitly racialized discourse of greed and deviance.

The difference between US and UK contexts also creates the potential for oppositional readings drawing on a broader British populist cultural critique of the US and associated racialized interpretations (see Morley and Robins, 1995; Webster, 1988). This interpretation is in contrast to Andrews’s argument that ‘the NBA is promoted within the British context as a celebration of American blackness’ (1999: 509). The television coverage analysed here gives little indication of this; rather, the dominant invited readings appear to be more like the racially transcendent or ‘neutered’ imagery in US NBA broadcasts, described by Andrews (1997). That a change of broadcaster occurred since Andrews’s (1999) observations to account for our differential observations highlights the need to explore the political economy of media production in understanding the dynamic local presence of global sports.

Observations regarding the discursive openness of coverage highlight a paradox of global sports broadcasting that arises from the need to address the lack of audience familiarity with global sports brands. In providing ‘indigenous referencing’ and education to enable viewers to understand a culturally grounded sports brand, local–global differences are highlighted and reinforced. These textual strategies invite juxtaposition and comparison, and open the potential for alternative readings from the audiences’ positioning. Accordingly, the textual strategies broadcasters and producers adopt to engage local audiences may facilitate ‘negotiated’ or oppositional stances to the dominant connoted meanings. In this respect, we echo Morley’s (1991) longstanding call for studies of media consumption to analyse the dynamics of globalization and localization. Calls for explorations of local audiences however, do not lend support to suggestions of sport ‘repudiating’ the global (Rowe, 2003), and analyses of local audience interpretations of sport texts need to relate variations to viewers overall location within the global system. Such questions are in line with a political economy of cultural consumption (Golding and Murdock, 1991).

This study reinforces the necessity of understanding the dynamics of media production in the patterning and presentation of global sport. In engaging with local broadcasting conditions, the NBA was constrained in its ability to fully control its ‘brand image’ via broadcasting. The nature of the UK television market prevented the NBA from simply distributing pre-packaged, and ‘brand consistent’ shows as it may do in other countries; and limited the ability of NBA executives to distribute a censured and sanitized portrayal of the league. In this regard, local particularities, in the shape of the relative sophistication of the UK television market, and the journalistic ethos of producers, worked to mediate the degree of NBA control over their representation. The political-economic interdependencies surrounding production were clearly significant in the range and pitch of programming. This research highlights, therefore, the need for detailed local case studies to consider local relations of production in the context of globalization. Such an approach is important in avoiding blithe assumptions of monolithic effects of powerful corporate-sport-media alliances, or overly optimistic interpretations of ‘polysemy’.
Notes

1. The term ‘America’ is commonly used in the UK (and the US) to refer to the United States. Recently, in Canada and Central and South America there have been growing concerns that the United States has co-opted the name of the entire continent for itself, and there is a growing tendency to refer to the United States specifically by that name. Given that this is an international journal, we also employ the more specific usage in this article.

2. These transitions incorporate: policy-driven neoliberal ‘deregulation’ of national markets; media conglomeration, merger and acquisition; the marketization of public service outlets; new technologies of delivery and payment rendering a proliferation of subscription based networks and channels.

3. There is a widespread tendency to exaggerate ‘global’ sports audiences. For example, Guevara and Fiddler (2002) suggest that in the case of MLB there is an ‘overhyping’ (p. 15) of world broadcasting. Despite this, the audiences are clearly considerable.

4. The themes were informed broadly by a figurational approach. They were: 1) Migrant/Indigenous: relating to the portrayal of migrant/indigenous personnel; 2) National Identities: reference to the national origins of personnel, ‘national’ characteristics/ stereotypes; 3) Localities: how is the local context of the game portrayed?; 4) Americanization: process by which the US becomes a fundamental cultural reference point; 5) Familiarization: with the NBA brand; 6) Global Monopoly Capitalism: way in which programming is linked to globally recognized product lines; 7) Consumption: extent to which programming situates the viewer as consumer.

5. In terms of reception, stratification issues are critical. In the context of NBA playing personnel ‘racialized’ stratification is particularly significant. Evidence of television viewing being patterned along ‘racial’ lines, has been found by Kanazawa and Fund (2001). Likewise, Wilson (1997) has noted the racialized ideologies inherent in representations of the NBA in Canadian media.

6. Olowokandi was born in Nigeria and educated in England, before going to the University of the Pacific in California. From there he was drafted as a first pick by the NBA in 1998. Although Olowokandi was born in Nigeria, it is his British background which is the focus of coverage that utilizes his indigenous connection to seek resonance with local markets.

References


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