The Role of Sport Journalists During Crisis Events in Sport

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Introduction

Journalists have become an integral component of the sport system. At the same time, the role of the sport journalist has become an increasingly complex, particularly since sport entered a period of hyper-commercialisation, in which the interests of business, sport and the media have become fused in a web of mutual promotional benefit. It is now often unclear just what the sport journalist's primary responsibility is. On one hand they may be employed to objectively report the facts to the public, while on the other they may be asked to selectively promote those sports in which the media organisations and their sponsors have a financial and emotional stake.

The general expectation that sport journalists should be impartial is brought into stark relief when sport clubs and officials have to confront a major problem or incident. During the regular season, in which sport journalists report on a range of typical information and events, the role of the sport journalist can be defined by the weekly training and playing cycle. During periods of crisis, turmoil, controversy and instability, however, this role can change markedly. The research shows that sport journalists have a vested interest in maintaining their relationships with their sources and the organisations and industry on which they rely for copy. However, in periods of turbulence this relationship often leads sport journalists to downplay the controversial elements of a story, or not report it at all. As a result they may lose their objectivity and submit stories that gloss over the more critical or unpleasant issues. There is also suggestive evidence that where the sport story becomes more commercial, political, and financial, the sport reporter's role is displaced by the more seriously trained news reporter.

There has been very little research conducted on the role of the sport journalist during periods of sporting crisis and controversy. This article aims to test the propositions that first, sport journalists downplay controversial

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issues, and second, that when the issues do become more controversial and commercialised the reporting is re-directed to news reporters. The focus of the analysis will be three crisis events in the Victorian and Australian Football Leagues.

These three incidents occurred at a time when Australian Rules football experienced a period of radical restructuring and commercial development. During the 1980s and 1990s the parochial Victorian Football League (VFL) progressed through a number of traumatic phases on its march to a national competition, the Australian Football League (AFL).

The first event was the South Melbourne Football Club 'relocation saga'. Throughout the last half of 1981 debate raged about the viability of the club and whether it should relocate to Sydney and reap the financial rewards of increased sponsorship and television exposure. After court cases, player strikes, an extraordinary general meeting and a prolonged period of internal administrative turmoil, it was agreed that the club would play its home games in Sydney in 1982. In 1983 the club moved to Sydney on a permanent basis. The second event was the Footscray Football Club's fightback campaign. In October 1989, a merger between the Fitzroy and Footscray Football Clubs was proposed. The announcement of the merger, which had been decided without consultation with the membership of either club, prompted large-scale community backlash and resistance in the western suburbs of Melbourne specifically, and across Melbourne more generally. A massive fundraising and legal campaign resulted in Footscray and Fitzroy continuing as autonomous entities for the 1990 season. The third event was the merger of the Fitzroy and Brisbane Football Clubs in 1996. Brisbane adopted the Fitzroy mascot in place of its 'bear', modified its playing uniform to incorporate the Fitzroy colours, recruited most of Fitzroy's best players and subsequently became the Brisbane Lions. In contrast to the Footscray fightback campaign, there was little resistance to the merger. However, it caused great controversy, as it seemed throughout the merger discussions that suburban neighbour North Melbourne was to be the likely merger partner, only to be 'trumped' at the eleventh hour by Brisbane.

Special Features of Sport Journalism

Sport is the largest single specialty in Australian journalism and 80 percent of sport journalists work for newspapers. Despite the historical precedence of sport writing and substantial readership, the print media have been neglected as a site of analysis, particularly when compared with television. This is surprising in view of the fact that the sport section in newspapers has expanded rapidly in recent years. Interestingly, its expansion was not curtailed by broadcast sport, but rather was enhanced and reinforced by it. Lever and Wheeler have suggested that newspapers in the American context
began to provide greater details, expert commentary and opinion as a result of the demand and appetite created by television coverage. This conclusion is supported by Rowe and Stevenson's assessment of the Australian sport media context.

The style and content of newspaper reporting has altered in response to the changes to and increased quantity of the media coverage of sport. As television captured the 'live' mediated space, and by consequence became the most immediate source of scores and results, newspapers had to explore other avenues of reporting and coverage to maintain interest and sales. Newspaper coverage of sport became more in-depth in a way that television and radio coverage could never be. This is particularly true of televised sport, in which networks that hold the broadcast rights are unlikely to provide negative or critical coverage. Consequently, newspaper sport stories often now contain more analysis and opinion. Print journalists have also been forced to get the inside scoop, as newspaper coverage seeks to provide a complementary information service that is different to radio or television commentary. This differentiated and complementary media coverage of sport has meant that reading about sport in newspapers has remained an important leisure activity for millions of readers, and the print media is an important source of sport insight, information, and gossip.

Despite the importance of sport in selling newspapers, sport reporters were traditionally low in the journalistic pecking order. The phrase 'toy department' was often used to denigrate the field of sport journalism and more specifically the sport section of a newspaper. Rowe suggested that sport journalism's image problem could be attributed to sport journalists' working class backgrounds and their lack of educational qualifications relative to other specialisations. Sport's anti-intellectual ethos is also part of the 'toy department' syndrome. In contrast, Garrison argued that from the mid 1960s both print and broadcast sport journalism have gone from being mostly fun and games to serious journalism and that sport reporting is as sophisticated as any other form of reporting. Sport journalism is now a legitimate profession and some of the paradoxes, such as the popularity of sport journalism versus credibility within the broader profession, and the fun of sport versus the seriousness of work, have prompted research that examines the behaviour of sport journalists and the mediated sport texts that they create.

The Beliefs and Behaviours of Sport Journalists

Sport has a reputation for being conservative, and not wishing to challenge conventional beliefs and practices. The same can be said about many sport journalists. For example, in a national survey conducted in the early 1990s, Henningham found that Australian sport journalists are:
Overwhelmingly male and Caucasian, slightly less well educated than other journalists, more conservative in their political values, less professional, but less inclined to support ethical breaches. They are happier in their work, less stressed, more supportive of traditional 'objective' models of journalism and less supportive of investigative roles for the media.  

Similarly, Garrison and Salwen found that sport section managers in America were typically young, white and male. A clear demographic profile of sport journalists emerged from these surveys, but it is less clear what role they were expected to perform. Koppett argued that the reporter’s job is to gather news and deliver some fraction of that news to the public as quickly as possible and that they should not be advocates, because this compromises the function of delivering information. In short, they are conduits between the source and the reader. However, his views have been challenged by Rowe and Stevenson, who suggested that in producing the sport text, a journalist necessarily involves her or himself in a series of complex negotiations, with media management, other journalists (inside and outside the discipline), editors, sports organisations (from coaches through to media managers), athletes and finally, their readers.  

Smith suggested that the public expects that sport journalists will act as an ombudsman, to expose injustice and keep the sport' promoters honest, while: Klatell and Marcus argued that relative to their television counterparts print journalists practice free and enterprising reporting. Whether the sport journalist is seen as an apologist or booster for sport' promoters and events, or as an essential element of the democratic function of the fourth estate, an understanding of their complex work is incomplete without an examination of their work practices and the specific nature of sports news production.  

According to Lowes, the sports newswork environment is similar to other news departments, in which there are daily pressures to produce quality copy and constraints within which the sport journalists must operate, such as time, money and resources. In response to these conditions, sport journalists have institutionalised their work routines. The major component of this institutionalisation is referred to as the 'beat' system, whereby a reporter is assigned to cover one or more sports on a full-time basis. The large commercial spectator sports could have several journalists working their 'beat', depending on the size of the sport, the newspaper and the market. As Theberge and Cronk noted, journalists must have ready and frequent access to reliable news sources in order to do their work. The 'beat' is a way of organising a journalist's access to information in order that the information is regular newsworthy, and attributable to credible news sources.  

Lowes explained that the 'beat' system is a huge investment of the
financial and human resources of a newspaper. As such, 'beat' reporters must produce continuous content, whether or not the story is newsworthy and whether or not the quality of writing is good. The result is that only the major commercial spectator sports are assigned beats, because they are seen to attract the greatest audience share. These sports have the resources to act as a constant source of information for journalists, through the employment of media, communication and marketing managers, as well as finances to support facilities that make the sport journalists' job easier, such as press boxes with phones, faxes and modems. Commercial spectator sports are also able to make their athletes, coaches and administrators available to the media more often than amateur or semi-professional sports. This is particularly the case in Australia, where the March-October period is dominated by Australian Rules football, Rugby League, Rugby Union, and European soccer. As a consequence, minority and women's sports are often neglected or ignored because they do not fit within the routine of sports-news gathering.

Lowes identified two primary categories of sources for the sport reporter — major commercial sport organisations, and their clubs, and personal contacts on the 'beat'. These routine sources comprise athletes, coaches, administrators or managers, player agents, team doctors, trainers, equipment managers, administrative staff, or in some circumstances, other sport reporters. Lowes noted that over a period of time reporters develop affection for the players, or even the team as a whole. These sentiments he argued, are precisely what sport organisations seek to exploit. However, the intimacy of this relationship means that sport journalists must be careful not to offend their routine sources, thereby cutting them off from a reliable source of information. Lowes suggested that in the most extreme cases sport reporters can bear the brunt of physical intimidation and violence as a result of a negative story, however, the more likely consequence of overt criticism is that the reporter will be marginalised or ostracised. It is important to note that Lowes conducted his research in North America, where typically cities have only one professional team in any one sport. In Australia, this has not been the case in the major football codes until fairly recently. In the Victorian Football League (which centred on Melbourne) and the New South Wales Rugby League (which centred on Sydney) six to ten teams were situated in the same metropolitan area. Even now, in Melbourne (AFL) and Sydney (National Rugby League, NRL) the 'beat' that Lowes referred to is likely to be a league, rather than a specific team.

Lowes also argued that sports news is a discourse that serves the promotional interests of the primary stakeholders in the commercial sports industry. Furthermore, there is little room in this discourse for news that does not promote the industry, because it is very difficult to create a culture
of consumption, both of sports and the media, if the news is regularly critiquing the sports industry. Likewise, Klatell and Marcus argued that no one likes to hear bad news, like the drug, alcohol and financial problems of athletes, be they from high school or professional sports leagues.

Their analysis of audience preference is complemented by Henningham's assessment that sport journalists have a 'neutral', rather than a 'participant' concept of journalism and that they prefer not to engage in investigative journalism or to stir up trouble. Similarly, Trujillo and Ekdom suggest that sport journalists avoid making explicit or critical value statements, and that socially critical commentary is not usually a feature of their stories.

When a controversial issue in sports does arise, reporters not associated with sport are often deployed to cover the story. The potential of jeopardising valuable relationships at the heart of the 'beat' system is such that even if a sport journalist uncovers the story, it may be passed on to the news desk. Wenner referred to this process as one in which the 'real' news about an industry moves forward (to the news desk) in order that a 'positive social take or fascination' with the industry can be maintained. In this respect, the sports section is no different from the entertainment or business section of a newspaper. Wheeler and Stanton's research shows that prior to 1975, owners, managers, coaches, league officials, referees and fans accounted for 10% of the total coverage, and that athletes and their teams were the primary focus. They confirm the analysis of Wenner, Rowe and Stevenson by noting that games and performers were the focus of readers' attention, and that there was little space devoted to investigative journalism or in-depth reporting.

The above discussion begs a number of questions. First, in what ways has the commercialisation and professionalisation of sport since 1975 changed the context of sport and its reporting? Second, to what extent has it compromised the position of sport journalists by forcing them to decide between their loyalty to the sport (and their links to key officials) and their loyalty to journalistic inquiry and criticism? Finally, to what extent do the consequent emergence of critical incidents and crises that focus on things like politics, legal problems and financial instability, create additional space for news reporters at the expense of the sport reporter? These questions frame the following analysis of three football crisis events.

Three Football Crisis Events

In order to answer the questions posed above, three football crisis events were investigated. They are, as indicated in the introduction to this paper, the South Melbourne relocation saga of 1981, the Footscray Fightback campaign of 1989, and the Fitzroy-Brisbane merger of 1996. The research approach adopted was a combination of what Stake referred to as the
intrinsic, instrumental and collective case study models. The research design consisted of elements of the intrinsic approach, whereby a study is undertaken in order to acquire a better understanding of the case, because the particularity of the case is of interest to the researcher and pertinent to the aim of the research. Each of the three case studies in this paper is a subject of interest because of its particularity and unique nature, as well as the fact that it is pertinent to the aims of the research, given that each of the events was controversial or turbulent. The research approach also consisted of elements of what Stake suggested was the instrumental approach, in which a particular case is chosen to 'provide insight into an issue or refinement of a theory' and facilitates the understanding of something other than the case itself. The three case studies in this paper were chosen to provide insight into the print media representation of crisis events in sport. Furthermore, they provide an opportunity to examine the notion that sport journalists are unlikely to jeopardise their sources and contacts by reporting on controversial issues and that sport journalists generally take a neutral or 'objective' approach in their reporting. Finally, the research design consists of elements of the collective case study model, whereby a researcher examines a number of cases jointly, in order to establish a better understanding, or to theorise about a larger collection of cases. The case studies were selected because, as a collective, they enable the research to establish findings that will lead to a better understanding about the way in which the print media represents crisis events in sport. It should be noted, however, that the case study approach, although it allows the researcher to critically examine a theory or proposition or to generalise about behaviours or trends, is limited to the experience of the case studies.

The South Melbourne relocation saga, Footscray Fightback and Fitzroy merger cases are identified in the literature and generally understood to be major points of discontinuity in the history of the VFL/AFL. In terms of the events selected as case studies for this article, Stewart, Andrews, Pascoe, Stoddart, Linnell and Nadel note that they were significant turning points in the history of the VFL/AFL and importantly, were the antithesis of the status quo. Furthermore, they were all moments that illustrated the tension, as Andrews suggested, between the cultural and economic reproduction within the VFL/AFL.

Each of the cases selected for this research was a distinctive and unique episode in the history of the VFL/AFL. The South Melbourne relocation saga was the first time in the history of the VFL/AFL that a club relocated to another state. Prior to South Melbourne's relocation to Sydney, the VFL had been a state-based competition, with all of its clubs located in Melbourne or Geelong. The Footscray Fightback was the first time in the history of the VFL/AFL that a merger was announced between two League clubs.
Subsequently, it was the first time that club supporters fought to save their club from a merger promoted by the administrators of both clubs and the VFL. The Fitzroy merger with Brisbane was the first time in the history of the VFL/AFL that two clubs merged.

For each of the case studies, data collection consisted of a comprehensive scan of the major Melbourne daily newspapers. In the case of the South Melbourne relocation saga and the Footscray Fightback campaign, the major Melbourne daily newspapers were the *Age, Herald* and *Sun*. In 1990 the *Herald* and *Sun* newspapers merged and on 8 October 1990 the first edition of the *Herald Sun* was published. Therefore, the final case study, Fitzroy's merger with Brisbane in 1996, consists of an analysis of two newspapers, the *Age* and *Herald Sun*, not three as in the previous two case studies.

**Findings**

In the light of previous research, it was anticipated that sport journalists would avoid controversial issues and pass stories or leads on to news reporters in order to protect their status and position. However, this was not the case in this study, since sport journalists wrote the majority of articles throughout the South Melbourne relocation saga in the *Age, Herald* and *Sun*. As Table One shows, news journalists wrote no articles in either the *Herald* or the *Sun*, although nine percent of *Age* articles were written by news reporters. Three of the *Age* articles were editorials and Prue Innes, an *Age* court reporter, wrote the remaining five.³⁵ This was the result of Innes' proximity and reporting responsibilities, rather than an active decision not to assign sport reporters to record what was essentially legalistic detail. As far as the anonymous articles in each of the three newspapers were concerned, it is likely that a significant proportion of these articles were sourced by sport journalists. The content of these articles was no more or less controversial than the articles attributed to the sport journalists and convention and convenience was the reason that authorship was not attributable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author Type</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Age #</th>
<th>Age %</th>
<th>Herald #</th>
<th>Herald %</th>
<th>Sun #</th>
<th>Sun %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sport Journalist</td>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Journalist</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>88</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sport journalists also wrote the majority of articles related to the Footscray Fightback campaign published in the *Age, Herald* and *Sun*, as illustrated in
Table Two. While there was a greater proportion of news reporting than in the case of South Melbourne, a significant proportion of the articles were not written by news journalists to ameliorate any concerns about alienating sources. Rather, it was because the crisis impacted on areas more directly relevant to news reporters.

Table Two: Distribution of Article Author Type — Footscray 'Fightback'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author Type</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Age #</th>
<th>Age %</th>
<th>Herald #</th>
<th>Herald %</th>
<th>Sun #</th>
<th>Sun %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sport Journalist</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>Herald</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>Herald %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Journalist</td>
<td>Herald</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>Herald %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Herald</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Herald</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Herald %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>Herald</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>Herald</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>Herald %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Herald</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>Herald %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the case of the Age reporting of the Footscray Fightback campaign, sport journalists accounted for 71 percent of all articles. This figure increases to 79 percent if the anonymous articles written by sport journalists are added. As in the case of the South Melbourne relocation saga, these anonymous articles were no more or less controversial than those where an author was attributed. Of the articles written by news journalists, a significant proportion related to the court action taken by Footscray supporters and the involvement in the crisis by the Victorian government. The court reporter and political reporters wrote these articles respectively. Like the South Melbourne case, this was due to the familiarity of the journalists with the subject matter, rather than an attempt to avoid recriminations. Furthermore, sport journalists wrote 21 of the first 22 Age articles related to the crisis that were published in the Age.36 This was the most emotionally charged and sensitive period of the crisis, in which it was more likely for news journalists to be assigned stories for strategic reasons.

The high proportion of newsjournalist articles in the Herald, as illustrated in Table Two, can be explained by the fact that articles that examined the involvement of local councils, the Victorian government or the trade union movement were written by political reporters. Furthermore, the Herald published a large proportion of editorials that related to the Footscray crisis, relative to the Age or Sun. Editorials accounted for twelve percent of the total Footscray crisis coverage in the Herald. Like the Herald, the Sun also published a large proportion of articles written by news journalists. The Sun published 40 percent of its entire coverage of the crisis on the second and third days, 4 and 5 October. Of the 36 articles published during this period, fourteen
were written by news journalists, equivalent to more than half the total number of articles written by news journalists throughout the crisis. A small staff of sport journalists could not have produced the amount of copy required in the initial phase of the crisis, given the quantity of the material that the *Sun* produced. As a result, news journalists were co-opted, not because of any desire to protect or shield sport journalists, but rather because of the sheer enormity of the task.

Sport reporters were also the primary authors of the majority of articles published in the *Age* and *Herald Sun* that related to the Fitzroy merger crisis in 1996, as illustrated in Table Three. The proportion of news journalists contributing to articles written during the crisis was greater than during the South Melbourne case, but less than in the case of the Footscray Fightback. By 1996 the *Herald* and *Sun* newspapers had merged to form the *Herald Sun*, so Tables One, Two and Three do not lend themselves to a direct comparison. It is clear, however, that sport journalists were the primary producers of Fitzroy crisis related news.

Table Three: Distribution of Article Author Type — Brisbane Lions Merger

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author Type</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Age #</th>
<th>Age %</th>
<th>Herald Sun #</th>
<th>Herald Sun %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sport Journalist</td>
<td><em>Age</em></td>
<td>120</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Journalist</td>
<td><em>Age</em></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td><em>Age</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td><em>Age</em></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>148</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the *Age*, sport journalists wrote 81 percent of the total number of articles published throughout the Fitzroy crisis. Furthermore, when the anonymous articles probably written by or edited from material supplied by a sport reporter are added, the percentage of articles written by sport reporters rises to 86 percent. News reporters wrote nine percent of the Fitzroy merger crisis articles published in the *Age*, or ten percent when articles that were likely to have been written or edited from material written by a 'news' journalists are added. Of the thirteen articles written by news reporters, eight were written between 2 July and 7 July, at the high-point of the Fitzroy merger crisis. Due to the greater demand for event coverage during this period, articles by news reporters were published to supplement the amount of copy that the sport reporters were able to produce in addition to their regular duties. Editorials accounted for three percent of the entire coverage in the *Age*, while two miscellaneous articles, written by Fitzroy supporter
Barry Dickins and AFL chief executive officer Ross Oakley, accounted for one percent of the entire coverage.

Sport reporters were also the primary authors of the majority of Fitzroy merger crisis articles published in the *Herald Sun*, as illustrated by Table Three. Articles written by sport reporters accounted for 73 percent of the entire coverage, or 80 percent if the anonymous articles that were sourced by a sport reporter are included. News reporters were the primary authors of eighteen percent of the entire coverage, equivalent to 29 articles. Of the 29 articles written by news reporters, 23 were published during the period that spanned from 29 June to 6 July, during the high-point of the Fitzroy merger crisis. As in the *Age*, articles written by news reporters supplemented the amount of copy written by sport reporters. If the anonymous articles that were sourced by a news reporter are added to the news reporter category, the articles written by news reporters increases marginally to nineteen percent. Finally, there were two editorials published in the *Herald Sun* that accounted for one percent of the entire coverage.

In summary, sport reporters wrote the overwhelming majority of articles published in major daily newspapers on the three crisis events in question, contrary to the suggestion in the literature that news reporters would be expected to write a significant proportion of articles during periods of controversy in sport. At the same time, the results also show that, in general, articles written by news reporters were used to supplement the amount of copy that sport reporters were able to write during the high-point of the crisis. This can be explained by the increased demand for information during this phase. The results also indicate that additional reports were written by news reporters with specific beats that were relevant to the crisis event. The most frequently cited beats were court reporting and local government affairs. There was no evidence within the three case studies that news reporters were primarily engaged to protect the routine sources of sport reporters, as suggested in the literature.

Of course, the statistics presented as part of the findings of this research are only one component of more complex research, but they do provide a valuable guide, particularly given the weight of material in the literature, albeit some in different geographical and sporting contexts, that suggested that sport journalists might avoid controversial reporting in order to protect their sources and livelihoods. The content of the articles, the tone of the writing, the language used in headlines and the perspective of visual images published to supplement the written material all contribute to forming a more complete picture of the role of sport journalists during the three cases.
Conclusion

The results of this study show that sport reporters wrote the vast majority of articles published during each of the three crisis events. This finding is contrary to the literature, which concluded that during periods of controversy in sport, news reporters break or cover sensitive stories in order that sport reporters are able to maintain a working relationship with their sources. Moreover, news reporters were only used in select situations. First, news reporters wrote articles during phases of the crises in which the amount of published material was unable to be produced by the sport department alone. Second, they wrote articles that complemented the coverage of sport reporters, especially court stories, human-interest stories and features on disenfranchised supporters. Finally, news reporters were not, in the main, seconded to write articles during the three crisis events in order to prevent sport reporters being ostracised by the football industry, or protect the reporter's sources.

In the South Melbourne case the reporters were not critical of the proposal to relocate the club to Sydney and privileged the position of players and key administrators, their sources and contacts within the football industry. In fact, in some instances the reporters abandoned a position of 'objectivity' in favour of advocating the rights of players and the seeming inevitability of the Sydney survival package. They favourably reported South Melbourne's determination to relocate the club in order to secure a more profitable financial arrangement. So, although sport reporters wrote the vast majority of the articles on South Melbourne's relocation proposal, they downplayed the more controversial elements of the relocation saga. Sport journalists focussed on micro issues, rather than engage in analysis of macro issues, such as the increasing gentrification of Melbourne's inner city suburbs, the parlous financial state of many Victorian clubs after the commercialisation and inflation of the 1970s, the rationale behind the VFL freezing South Melbourne's share of the ground improvement funds or the potential beginnings of a nationalised league. Furthermore, the fact that sport journalists in the Age, Herald and Sun used administrators, coaches and players as their primary sources skewed their analysis, in most cases in favour of the source. Despite the fact that the vast majority of the articles were written by sport journalists, the content and tone was designed to play down controversy and conflict, particularly if it was contrary to the interests of the journalists' primary industry contacts.

The Footscray and Fitzroy cases were vastly different, as sport journalists were prepared to advocate courses of action, support one side of the merger debate in favour of another or openly criticise the management of a club or the League. Indeed, during the Fitzroy merger crisis reporting in particular, some sport reporters adopted a position that was argumentative
and adversarial. They were not, in Wenner's terms, concerned about maintaining a 'positive social take or facination'. In fact, sport journalists, particularly in the Fitzroy-Brisbane merger case, were openly critical and negative to the point that they engaged in personal criticism of the crisis protagonists.

While the results of these three case studies show that sport reporters wrote the majority of articles, the increasingly politically charged nature of the events produced a change in the tone and content of many articles. Specifically, there were a significant number of articles published in which sport journalists advocated that particular courses of action be taken, or openly criticised the actions of crisis participants. These types of articles do not fit within the beat sport-news reporting model. In fact, a new role, the 'advocate', emerged. In their 'advocate' role, journalists suggested that particular courses of action should be pursued, and frequently criticised crisis participants for courses of action that were undertaken previously. However, there was no demonstrable evidence to suggest that, in their role of 'advocate' the print media was able to manipulate the information, or that they directly altered the outcomes of the crisis. In this respect, the role of advocate is more in keeping with a journalist's position as an analyst or commentator. This development is in part a result of the transformation of newspaper content throughout the period of intensive commercialisation and broadcasting of sport, where newspaper reporters were forced into providing strong and forceful off-field analysis in the absence of any on-field immediacy.

Although each of the three cases studies illustrate the increasing commercialisation of Australian Rules football at the professional level, the media representation of the events did not always serve the promotional interests of the primary stakeholders, which included league administrators, club officials and corporate sponsors. While much of the reporting during the South Melbourne relocation saga resulted in downplaying the controversial elements of a plan to relocate a foundation club of the VFL, this was not as evident in the final two cases. In both the Footscray Fightback and the Fitzroy-Brisbane merger, the discourse, rather than promoting the industry and encouraging consumption, instead encouraged readers to question the legitimacy of administrators within a framework of economic analysis and accountability. In the case of the Fitzroy crisis in particular, sport journalists felt comfortable adopting an adversarial style of reporting, rather than a neutral concept that was a prevalent theme in Henningham's study.

The fact that this case study research does not support the North American results can be explained in the following way. First, by the middle of the 1980s Melbourne's sport journalists had become accustomed to the commercial and structural changes occurring in the VFL. As a result, critical
analysis of the league's off-field developments was considered standard practice. Second, most of the sport reporters during this period were experienced and had developed solid reputations within the sports-world. They were not easily intimidated by league and club officials making threats to cut off their information sources. Finally, in a parochial and competitive media market like Melbourne, club and league officials had more to gain than lose by alienating reputable journalists.

Notes

1 David Rowe and Deborah Stevenson, 'Negotiations and Mediations: Journalism, Professional Status and the Making of the Sports Text', *Media Information Australia*, no. 75, 1995, p. 73.


5 Rowe and Stevenson, 'Negotiations and Mediations', p. 69.


8 Rowe, 'Modes of Sports Writing', p. 98.


13 Rowe and Stevenson, ‘Negotiations and Mediations’, p. 68.
18 Theberge and Cronk, 'Work Routines in Newspaper Sports Departments and the Coverage of Women's Sports', p. 198.
19 Lowes, Inside the Sports Pages, pp. 33-47. See also Theberge and Cronk, 'Work Routines in Newspaper Sports Departments and the Coverage of Women's Sports', p. 199.
20 For example see Theberge and Cronk, 'Work Routines in Newspaper Sports Departments and the Coverage of Women's Sports', pp. 195-203.
22 Lowes, Inside the Sports Pages, p. 82.
26 Henningham, A Profile of Australian Sports Journalists', p. 17.
28 Rowe and Stevenson, 'Negotiations and Mediations', p. 73.
29 Wenner, 'Drugs, Sport and Media Influence', p. 284.


34 Andrews, 'From a Club to a Corporate Game', pp. 248-249.


36 See, for example, Garry Linnell, 'Lions and Bulldogs Set to Merge After Secret Talks', *Age*, 3 October 1989, p. 1; Martin Flanagan, 'Fan's Lament: "The Football Part of My Life has Gone"', *Age*, 4 October 1989, p. 1; Ron Carter, Two-Year Salary Bonanza', *Age*, 4 October 1989, p. 28; Patrick Smithers and Greg Baum, 'Bulldogs in Boycott Threat', *Age*, 5 October 1989, p. 28; Harvey Silver, Greg Baum and Garry Linnell, 'Magpies Condemn Merger', *Age*, 5 October 1989, p. 28.

37 See, for example, David Fisher, 'Hurt Fans Fight, But it's Done', *Sun*, 4 October 1989, p. 1; Amanda Buivids, 'Merger a Blessing for VFA', *Sun*, 5 October 1989, p. 80; Matthew Freeman, Ted takes a New Merger Stance', *Sun*, 5 October 1989, p. 4.

39 See, for example, Peter Simunovich, 'Sydney or Bust!', *Sun*, 2 July 1981, pp. 64-63; Mike Sheahan, 'Sydney or Bust! — Says Stewart', *Herald*, 30 July 1981 p. 38; Mike Sheahan, 'Swans: Why We are Out', *Herald*, 4 December 1981, p. 30.