

Rugby Nation: Youth and Sports News Reinforcing National Identity

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Abstract

News is an important area where the nation turns to, looking for an understanding of national and world events and to place it in a historical context. Arguably, the quality of this information can only be obtained when there is a diversity and plurality in media offerings. Modern commercial music radio is now in a state of disruption with increased competition from digital arenas, pressure to maintain financial performance and audience ratings. One method to keep audiences listening has been the service of providing sports news. With sports being a large part of the national psyche, and intimately tied into the historical identity of being a sports mad nation, what coverage are they presenting and what are the ramifications of this coverage in reinforcing a mythical national identity? An investigation into the diversity of sports news will be one avenue in which to examine whether news organisations are delivering a range of content that mirrors the range of sports being participated and excelled at locally and internationally. Looking at two youth radio stations over a similar month in 2013 and 2016, does their sports news coverage provide justification of assertions that they are providing a service for the public good? Cross media comparisons demonstrated the continuing history of marginalization of women's sports and focus on just a few major sporting codes. Utilising agenda setting theory and content analysis, there may be unintended consequences of a limited service that reinforces the way the country sees itself.

Keywords: Diversity, News, Radio, Sport, Youth, Identity

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Introduction

According to Sport New Zealand, the government agency responsible for sport and recreation policy and funding “74% of adults (2.5 million people) take part in sport and recreation in any given week” (2015, p.4), with younger adults¹ amid the highest participants. Just like sport, the media also commands a lot of New Zealanders’ leisure time with a similar proportion of 18-34 years olds (79%) tuning in to radio on a weekly basis (Venuto, 2016). Radio has an important role as a major source of information about social, economic and political processes. It also reflects and reinforces the way a country sees itself. One of the major responsibilities of the press in a democracy is that of guaranteeing citizenship, by making it possible for citizens to arrive at an informed decision with consequences on issues of governance and accountability. Arguably, the quality of this information can only be obtained when there is a diversity and plurality in media offerings so that citizens have a choice. Commentators believe that the “proper role of the press is to provide editorial content that responds to the interests of the public, not the public plus advertisers” (Baker, 2002, p. 24).

New Zealand is a self-confessed sports-mad nation, and overseas is frequently known for our rugby fanaticism. One avenue where an assessment of the commitment to diversity and plurality is found is in the delivery of sports news, as it is an integral part of the fabric of the country’s culture. “Sport has become big media business as well as remaining such a feature of the country’s sense of national identity” (Harvey, 2002, p. 96). Since the country’s identity is tied in with a strong sporting culture, and that radio is still widely consumed across most demographics, there is space to research how well New Zealand commercial radio is providing a news product that fits the needs of the populace. Looking at how it might influence the critical 18-34-year-old market becomes the focus due to their dominant role as players, and roles as supporters and fans. An investigation into the diversity of sports news will examine whether media news organisations are delivering a range of content that mirrors the variety of sports being participated in and excelled at locally and overseas, and how this plays a role in the normalisation of national culture.

News and the New Zealand radio market: A background

Following deregulation of the radio industry in 1989, enhanced competition brought changes to New Zealand’s radio news services. In 1994 public broadcaster Radio New Zealand (RNZ) was the dominant news provider and owned both commercial and non-commercial stations. The only competition was in the form of Independent Radio News (IRN), established in 1986 to provide network news and sports bulletins to other commercial stations. However, IRN was “fledgling in comparison, [to RNZ] both in its scale of operation and in the number of clients served” (Norris & Comrie, 2005, p.175).

In 1996, the commercial arm of RNZ became The Radio Network (TRN) and expanded its brief by purchasing Prospect Media Limited and acquiring frequencies in major cities to roll out network brands. TRN also bought IRN, later absorbing it into network news brand Newstalk ZB, which supplied news to TRN stations nationwide

¹ According to the Sports New Zealand survey, young adults are aged 16-24 years.

as well as non-TRN stations such as the Rhema (Christian) radio network and other independent radio operators. Opposition commercial radio network RadioWorks, a client of IRN, was uncomfortable paying its competitor for its news service and set up its own in 2000. This was known as Global News after Canadian company CanWest acquired RadioWorks in 2001 (Norris & Comrie, 2005, p.182). News brand Radio Live took over the bulletins from Global News in 2005 for MediaWorks' network of radio stations around the country. New Zealand now had competing commercial radio news networks, as well as news from public broadcaster RNZ.

In addition to the plethora of rival music formats, TRN and MediaWorks both launched specialist sports radio networks. TRN's Radio Sport began broadcasting from the country's biggest city, Auckland in 1998 and was "the first radio station in this sports-mad nation to broadcast sporting commentaries and sport talk, all day, every day" (Shanahan, 2005, p. 138). In 2007 RadioWorks launched dedicated sport and (horse) racing network BSport. BSport was re-branded as Live SPORT in 2010 to complement news brand Radio Live, but ceased broadcasting in 2015 following the sale of MediaWorks to an American hedge fund, with its frequencies relegated to the more profitable music formats. The target audience of both sports networks is older and predominantly male.

The networking of content and the inevitable centralisation of programming to the main centre of Auckland saw the number of independent stations and local programmes diminish. This had a flow-on effect for news and sport with less opportunity for local coverage.

Local input to radio stations decreases as companies try to run profitably in very crowded markets. Increased coverage areas, networking, automation and associated uses of digital technology are changing the nature of work in radio and the medium itself, away from its local community orientation and involvement and towards the production of multiple brands of a similar product to position themselves for consumers. (Wilson, 1994, p. 62)

The networks have launched similar and competing multi-platform digital news services in recent times. In 2014, TRN and APN News and Media formed new entity New Zealand Media & Entertainment (NZME.), combining radio, print and digital; and in early 2016, MediaWorks launched Newshub, combining television, radio, and digital services (MediaWorks, 2016). Both digital brands have a national focus.

The importance of radio and sport for younger audiences

Despite the move to online, traditional media choices - radio and television - still deliver the largest audiences in New Zealand. According to research conducted in 2014 and followed up in 2016 "more New Zealanders tune in to these media, more often, and for longer than any alternatives" (Colmar Brunton, 2014, p.3; NZ On Air, 2016, para. 4). However, with the concentration of networks and competition for the same audiences, there is less diversity in programme formats. Just as the two commercial radio networks have competing music brands targeting the same audience demographics, news bulletins are market driven and tailored in style and content to these audiences. Radio news editor Kevin Hercock sees radio as having to serve a wide range of different stations as clients, with different clients receiving different

products, “shorter stories for the commercial youth stations, with longer ones for the more traditional audiences” (Norris & Comrie, 2005, p. 182). Both of New Zealand’s major radio networks have stations targeting the younger-end of the market, 18-34 year olds, with Pop or Contemporary Hit Radio (CHR) being the format of choice for this age group (Nielsen, 2016). This is also a key demographic for radio, and in 2013 “[New Zealand] commercial radio reached 74 percent of all people aged 18-34 years” (Fahy, 2013, para. 3). According to a 2013-14 Sport New Zealand survey, this is the same percentage of New Zealanders aged 16 years and older who participate in sport on a weekly basis (2015).

The correlation between media coverage of sport and participation is well documented (Dawson & Downward, 2009; Saini, 2015; Hardin & Greer, 2009), and the importance of youth participation and sport even more so. “The power of the sports media – especially for an emergent sport – can have the effect of profoundly influencing its developmental direction and, for example, turning it from a relatively inexpensive, causal, pleasure-oriented pastime into an expensive, high-tech, performance-oriented pursuit” (Rowe, 2015, p. 151). How it affects culture is more contested. National identity is considered to be a “fluid process, a constantly shifting and evolving concept” (Said, 1994, p. 84). It comes about through cultural construction and maintenance. This is due in part to the influence of the law, the education system and the media. Former Minister of Broadcasting, Hon Marian Hobbs reiterated the importance of media for the creation of our national identity. “Radio and television can, of course, be vital media for our own narratives and images. They have an extraordinarily pervasive presence in our lives, conditioning for better or worse the way we see our country, and the opinions and values we hold” (Hobbs, 2000).

However, how much sport content targets younger audiences, and is radio delivering a diverse range of sports? How will this reinforce identity? A content analysis of sports news coverage on New Zealand’s top two commercial music stations was conducted twice over the period of four years to attempt to answer these questions.

Methodology

New Zealand’s two highest rating, networked commercial music stations were chosen as the basis for this study - The Edge and ZM. Both target the lucrative 18-34-year-old market. In a country that has no dedicated publicly funded youth network or youth-specific commercial music network such as Australia’s Triple J, these could be considered the closest New Zealand has to youth-targeted radio. In both 2013 and 2016, The Edge was the number one station nationally for cumulative audience for 18-34 year olds and ZM number two. These two stations were also the top two online commercial radio stations (Nielsen, 2016).

The research spanned two periods. The stations were surveyed from early October to early November 2013 and duplicated in 2016. These periods were purposely chosen as they were outside of the build up to or execution of major international sporting events such as the Olympics, Rugby World Cup or America’s Cup. The research was conducted at the same time of year to see if there were any changes in the intervening

period, but retaining any seasonal sporting bias for consistency². Two random bulletins were selected daily from each station during peak listening times of 6am to 5pm. Bulletins dropped off at 6pm, coinciding with a known decline in listenership (NZOA, 2016, p.28); weekday bulletins were chosen as this is when newsrooms are typically fully staffed. Sports stories that featured as part of the bulletins were placed in to categories by sporting code utilising content analysis.

Results

176 news bulletins were sampled over the two research periods. There was a public holiday during both sample periods and therefore no news on The Edge for this day. Overall, news bulletins were short in nature with sports news typically relegated to the end of the bulletin.

Table 1: Average number of sports stories per bulletin

Station	2013	2016
The Edge	1.9	2.2
ZM	1.4	2
Combined	1.65	2.1

In 2013, on average both stations presented two or fewer sports stories per bulletin and nearly one-third (36%) of bulletins featured just one sports story. There was a small increase in the number of sports stories per bulletin on both stations in 2016, and only 11% of bulletins featured just one sports story.

Top Sports

Top sports have been those defined as reaching double-figures with the total number of stories presented across both stations.

Table 2: Top sports 2013

2013	Total # of stories (both stations)	% of total stories
Rugby	44	31%
Rugby League	25	17%
Cricket	21	15%
Netball	10	7%

In 2013, just four sports made up 70% of the stories broadcast on both stations from 14 different sports covered. The four sports - Rugby, Rugby League, Cricket and Netball - were ranked in the same order on both stations. The only female-dominated sport to make the list, Netball, did not make double-figures on either station with just

² October-November is a transitional period for two of the most prominent sports in New Zealand - Rugby and cricket (and therefore not favouring either one). As most major sports are played nationally and internationally, there are events throughout the year and it was impossible to avoid some sporting meets. There was one Australasian fixture of note during the 2013 calendar period, a Bledisloe Cup (Rugby Union) game between New Zealand and Australia in Dunedin on the 19th of October.

four stories on The Edge and six on ZM. Female sports were categorised based on the sporting code (e.g. netball), team, or if a female player was the subject of the story (e.g. Lydia Ko for Golf).

Table 3: Top sports 2016

2016	Total # of stories (both stations)	% of total stories
Rugby	55	29%
Cricket	30	16%
Rugby League	19	10%
Football	18	9%
Netball	17	9%
Basketball	11	6%

In 2016, six sports made up 79% of the stories broadcast across both stations from 18 different sports. Rugby and Cricket were first and second respectively on both stations. Once again Netball was the only female-dominated sport to make the list and was ranked 5th overall; third equal on ZM (with Rugby League) and fifth on the Edge.

Table 4: Top sports 2013 and 2016

2013-2016	Total # of stories (both stations)	% of total stories
Rugby	99	34%
Cricket	51	17%
Rugby League	44	15%
Netball	27	9%
Football	25	9%
Basketball	18	6%
Golf	16	5%
Tennis	12	4%

Overall there were just 20 different sports included in the bulletins. Only eight sports made double-figures with the number of stories broadcast. From a total of 292 stories, two thirds of the top stories broadcast over the two research periods came from three sports - Rugby, Cricket and Rugby League - with over 50% of the total stories attributed to either Rugby or Rugby League. Netball and Football both scored 9% of the total number of stories broadcast. Golf and Tennis sat just outside of the top lists in 2013 and 2016 respectively.

In 2013, the Edge had more of a focus on football, and in 2016, ZM had an increased coverage of Golf (with most stories about New Zealand professional golfer Lydia Ko). Apart from these two anomalies, there was little difference to the attention paid to the same standard sports in news coverage by each of the stations. In terms of unique sports, Equestrian and Hockey only appeared in 2013. In 2016 AFL, Baseball, Cycling, Racing, Martial Arts and Olympics featured and were sports not covered in the previous research period.

Discussion

The range of sports New Zealanders participate and excel in is vast, from adventure racing to yachting. From local sports teams to individuals winning on the world stage, New Zealand has a love affair with champions who can beat the odds and deliver incredible results from just two islands of 4.5 million people.

In 2013-14 Sports New Zealand noted a number of high performance results: New Zealand crowned best rowing nation; shot-putter Valerie Adams became the first woman to win four individual gold medals at the Commonwealth Games; golfer Lydia Ko turned professional and won her first title, and swimmer Lauren Boyle became the first New Zealander to win three medals at a single Pan Pacific Championships (FairFax, 2013).

The following sporting achievements were highlighted in 2016: sailors Peter Burling and Blair Tuke won gold at the 49er in Rio; Joseph Parker claimed the WBO heavyweight boxing title, and basketballer Steven Adams secured an NBA-contract extension (Hinton, 2016).

According to Sport New Zealand, people participate in over 130 types of sports and recreation activities annually (2015) and are competitive in many of them. However, if you were to listen to commercial music radio, you would be forgiven for thinking there were only a handful worth knowing about. In total, just 20 sports made it in to sports news bulletins in 2013 and 2016 combined. During the 2013 research period, with only four sports making double-figures across both stations, there was a large gulf between this group and the remaining 11 sports. During the 2016 research period, 18 different sports were represented, and there was a small increase in the number of sports to make double-figures across both stations with Football and Basketball added to mix.

Rugby and Rugby League topped the tables in both 2013 and 2016 and are (arguably) the highest profile sports in New Zealand. In 2017, New Zealand is listed as number one in world Rugby rankings, and number two in Rugby League and these sports received the most news coverage. In part, this is due to the globalisation of sport that has seen many sports being active nationally or internationally for much of the year. For example, rugby covers most of the calendar year in New Zealand, with the international season running from July to November, and the Southern Hemisphere rugby competition from February to July. Impossible to avoid, it was no surprise to see rugby top the sports news list for both stations and in both years.

However, the notion that this coverage mirrors appeal is under threat. "Rugby and league are experiencing a major downturn in appeal according to a survey that aims to identify New Zealand's prime sporting interests and how they have changed since 2010. Rugby had dropped by 17 per cent to lie second with 34 per cent, and interest in league had fallen significantly, down 22 per cent to 21 per cent" (Herald, 2016). The overwhelming coverage of the top male sports also cannot be attributed solely to their success. The national club teams in the Australasian league and football competition have traditionally had a poor winning rate, with football's Phoenix coming second to last in 2016 (Hyundai A-League Tables, 2016), and league's Warriors finishing 10th. (Brady, 2016).

Importantly, the historical institutionalised rationale to devote journalists' time to these two sports impacts audience engagement and contributes to a country's sense of understanding itself. Sports covered by the media have important ramifications for visibility, leading to increased participation, funding, and the creation of celebrities, which are attractive to sponsors and can contribute to increased gate takings leading to stronger financial positions for sports organisations running as a business. "Consistent, ongoing media coverage can promote the profiles of various sports...The media also have the capacity to promote positive role models...and develop increased spectator appeal for various sports" (Amezdroz, Dickens & Hosford, 2004, p. 495). Sport New Zealand directly invests more than \$100 million in to the sport and recreation sector across a variety of sports (Sport New Zealand, 2014) and believes that, for young people in particular, "developing a love of sport at an early age is more likely to encourage a lifelong participation habit" (Sport New Zealand, n.d., p.6).

The focus on just a few sports plays into accusations of reinforcing a narrow view of what it is to be a sports fan in New Zealand. When there is overwhelming coverage of just one sport, it falsely amplifies the importance of that sport to an impressionable youth market, and despite falling participation rates, it continues to present a façade of universal appeal.

Radio programming and the diversity of sports coverage

The media has an important role to play in informing audiences, and in New Zealand traditional media (radio and television) still delivers the biggest audiences (Colmar Brunton, 2014, p. 13). The Edge and ZM were selected for this research as they are the two highest-rating commercial music stations in New Zealand. In addition to similarities in music genre (chart-based/pop) and presentation (e.g. multi-person breakfast and drive shows), the presentation of news and sports is also similar. Bulletins are placed at the top of the hour across the day with generally no bulletins in the evenings. This is in keeping with the Colmar Brunton survey audience which found that "Radio and newspapers...typically start New Zealanders' day, and TV takes over at 6pm" (2014, p. 3).

Fewer bulletins and a reliance on only a handful of sports stories to fill them is, in part, due to the way that radio has evolved to compete for listeners' attention in an intensely competitive environment. Commercial time constraints mean that radio is much more selective than print and affords much less sense of the relative importance of the items it does include, due to the time dedicated to stories. Reporters traditionally report stories emanating from their assigned round and in the case of high profile sports such as Rugby, League, Cricket, Netball and Football, a major news outlet will assign a reporter to cover the round almost to the exclusion of other sports. One result of the news 'beat' or assignment system means that sports that do not share the spotlight get sparse coverage at best. In a professionalised sports universe, minor sports such as hockey and swimming will generally only get significant airtime during Olympic or Commonwealth Games campaigns when there is a dedicated reporting team. There is a media perception that the sport must be major league to merit serious time, or even inclusion. The argument for the structuring potency of routines is a compelling one, because one can well understand the

difficulties for journalist and producer faced with the basic need to ‘get out’ a programme every hour.

Sport New Zealand’s 2013/14 Active New Zealand Survey results cited that “on average, young adults participated in more activities than all other age groups” (2015, p. 30), and were more likely to be competitive. Of the over 130 sports and recreational activities listed in the survey, the most popular were still Golf, Football, Tennis, Netball, Cricket and Touch Rugby (2015, p.7). Interestingly, cricket and rugby did not make the top 20 sports for women in the Sport New Zealand survey and yet both of these sports featured highly in this research. This is ironic when you consider that both The Edge and ZM both have a female-skewed audience.

Cricket, Rugby, Rugby League and Netball were the most consistently-covered sports over the two research periods and there is evidence to suggest that radio may simply be reflecting the most high-profile and well-resourced sports. Sport New Zealand’s Annual Report shows that there was increased investment in Netball, Rugby, Rugby League and Cricket in 2013-14. “These sports were chosen because they were either mass participation and/or recreational sports” (2014, p. 19). Netball, Hockey and Gymsports (gymnastics, aerobics and trampoline) were the other recipients of increased funding that year with only the latter failing to make the research list despite the National Gymsports Championships being held during the research period. High-performance sporting results listed in the report for world-class achievements during the 2013-14 year highlighted a dozen sports, however just four made it to air during the research period.

Men’s Rugby and New Zealand’s national game

Centralisation has made it more difficult to target niche markets and has resulted in a homogenisation of content across all brands. The results of this survey have confirmed that the most popular and high profile sports are favoured with men’s Rugby topping the sports table with its (seemingly) universal appeal for all audiences. The success of New Zealand’s national rugby team over many decades has also contributed to the growth of the game financially, professionally and at the grass roots level. The expansion of the public relations machine has led to an increase of its profile and this is something the media is complicit in promoting. Easier access to the players and the success on the sporting stage goes hand in hand with the never-ending desire for content from the media machine. The power of sports coverage cannot be underestimated. Radio’s focus on a narrow range of results has important ramifications for participation, funding and national identity. This is understood through the media effect model of agenda setting. McCombs and Shaw’s 1972 argument that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media place on certain issues (e.g., based on relative placement or amount of coverage) and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences, is still highly relevant today.

A focus on just a few elite sports becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. More funding is given to top sports, which attracts more sponsorship money, with better resourcing arguably leading to a better chance of success and therefore more media coverage. And media coverage has been proven to affect the next generation of sport participants as “a broad complementarity is identified between sports participation,

and viewing sports either live or via the media as live or recorded activities” (Dawson & Downward, 2009, p. 21).

Sports news and youth

Radio is still a medium of choice, commanding an hour and three quarters of listening time per day (Colmar Brunton, 2014, p. 12). Radio is also where audiences hear about new music (NZ On Air, 2016), with youth the biggest consumers. While there is no doubt that the two radio stations examined are primarily music stations, they recognise that the youth audience consumes news and information and provides it by way of daily news and sport bulletins. The format of bulletins is in keeping with the entertainment mode; soft, dramatised news-for-entertainment. The time span of the broadcasts, 2-3 minutes, suggests that it is not a particularly highly regarded part of the show with a great deal more time per hour dedicated to commercials. A studied informality surrounds the presentation of the bulletins; personal identification with the presenter is invited. The bulletin then flows without pause into the next bracket of commercials. The implication seems to be that it is simply another commodity to be consumed like all others and is a frequently commercially sponsored feature on commercial radio. The position and sequencing of the bulletins places it clearly in the entertainment frame.

According to Higgins and Moss, news and sport should assist people in;

Developing a sense of history, of community and of nation, yet it persistently manipulates reality, equating news value with entertainment value, making it simply part of the show, it plays a significant part also in the manipulation of consciousness, in robbing people culturally and in preventing them from growing wise in their own ways. (1982, p. 99)

The sports news presented over the research period was limited in scope and short by nature, doing little to inform its audience or challenge hegemonic ideology. For clubs and organisations to thrive, there is a need for youth to be exposed to and participate in the wealth of sports and recreational activities a healthy culture should encapsulate. Narrowing the range of activities presented on radio to youth has the potential to focus attention onto the popular to the exclusion of many others. This lack of coverage has very real ramifications for participation and reinforces a mythical historic narrative about national identity.

Conclusion

News has an important role to play in our culture. Stories signal the appropriate ways of interpreting events, and sports stories have the potential to enlighten audiences to activity happening all around. However, because of frequent repetition of the same sports such as Rugby, certain historic cultural stereotypes are produced and maintained. It reinforces a worldview that shields us from alternative viewpoints through bias confirming news. It is therefore the drama and entertainment of the news broadcasts that distorts and cushions the full ideological significance of news - and a diversity of news - for the audience.

The bigger question remains in that is this democratic potential what we really expect of an entertainment medium? The problem remains that for many popular media there is no purpose to inform or enlighten. Often the primary aim of mass media is neither to transmit particular information nor to unite a public in some shared expression of culture, belief or values, but simply to catch and hold aural attention. In doing so, radio attains one economic goal, which is to “gain audience revenue (since attention = consumption, for most practical purposes), and an indirect one, which is to sell (the probability of) audience attention to advertisers” (McQuail, 2000, p. 72). Reductions and reconfigurations of news structures are part of an ongoing dynamic response of media managers to the competing pressures of continued demand for local news and the cost of its provision in various markets. The pressures are manifested in decreasing sound bites, and as Atkinson (1994) suggests, the *morselisation* of news content. Bulletins are getting shorter, reports barely scratch the surface and news values favour only the items that are simple to cover and popular.

Radio as a medium of public communication has both strengths and weaknesses, and the routine elevation of capacity for conveying some kinds of information can lead to the corresponding neglect for others. Populism is built into the notion of good journalism as good story telling which is relevant to the expressed needs of its audience. The problem stems from making a working distinction between what an audience wants and what it needs. What listeners are prepared to accept as measured by audience research is said to be what is most relevant to their needs and concerns, and this in turn is said to be what they ought to be given. Easy to source stories are presented with a focus on brevity and the superficial. The narrow range of sports reporting is contributing to a generation with a narrow worldview, and with the ongoing understanding of the news as a profitable commodity, there appears to be no end in sight.

It will be interesting to revisit this study in the future to measure what impact the converged media companies and integrated newsrooms have on news services for these commercial music brands. Will the more well-resourced newsrooms recognise this imbalance and proactively pursue stories that counter accusations of bias, or will the commercial time pressures and journalistic apathy continue to present a continuation of the historic ideology of only the most popular sports are worthy of reporting. Rugby’s continued dominance would suggest that it remains in the box seat, however most marginalised sport administrators would hope it is a game of two halves.

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