

Sharing the Spirit or Manufacturing Consent? Sydney 2000, Olympic Sport and the Australian Media

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At a time in Olympic history marked or, one might say, marred by unprecedented commercialism in the mounting of the Games as well as unparalleled levels of government and corporate funding and rewards for Olympic athletes in most developed countries, it is appropriate once again to reflect critically on Olympic ideology.

This paper focuses on the ways in which the Australian media shape public opinion concerning Olympic sport in general and the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games in particular. The Sydney 2000 Bid Committee had as its slogan, "Share the Spirit," a reference to both the Olympic spirit - the pursuit of excellence in sport - and the spirit of Australia, which might be characterised by the liberal myth of upward mobility through hard work and a national identity cemented by largely uncritical support for all competitive sporting endeavours.¹ I will present a deconstruction of Australian media treatment of Olympic-related issues in the first half of 1996, the period leading up to the Atlanta Games. As a visiting scholar at the University of Technology Sydney from March to July, 1996, I systematically monitored coverage of sport and Olympic issues in Sydney's major newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which, somewhat like Toronto's *Globe and Mail*, is seen as the city's serious and conservative paper. I also examined other popular print media, including the monthly magazine, *Inside Sport*, and viewed television news on a regular basis.

Two key themes emerged from the content analysis of coverage of Olympic-related issues in the *Herald*: first, the problems associated with the management and construction of the Sydney 2000 project, and, second, the drug problem in international sport and its implications for Australian athletes.

These themes need to be situated in the broader context of state and federal politics in Australia. In March 1996, after 13 years of Labour government, the federal election produced a right-wing swing, with the new Liberal/National Coalition under John Howard almost immediately dismantling many of former prime minister Paul Keating's progressive initiatives. In relation to the Sydney 2000 Olympic bid, however, it was recently revealed that Keating promised political support to Taiwan in exchange for that country's IOC vote,² although in the overwhelming national support for the bid, it is unlikely that Keating's action was responsible for any lost votes.

In New South Wales, where the Sydney 2000 Games will take place, the Labour Party has replaced the previous Liberal government under John Fahey which was involved in the development of the Sydney 2000 Olympic bid. The Fahey government's 1993 Olympic budget has been criticised for its faulty projections, which are generally defended on the grounds that precise figures were difficult to determine seven years in advance. The current Labour government inherited these problems; it is frequently the target of attack on budget and other issues, and is generally unpopular in the media and elsewhere.

Theoretical approaches to deconstructing media propaganda

"Manufacturing consent," a term first used by Walter Lippman in 1921, is central to the analysis of the political economy of the mass media developed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in 1989. Their insights, together with Chomsky's 1989 collection of essays, aptly titled *Necessary Illusions*,³ provide the basis for the theoretical framework used here.

Consistent with the neomarxist explanations of ruling which focus on the ways in which power is exercised through ideological control rather than armies, Chomsky's propaganda model states that the media "reflect the consensus of powerful elites of the state corporate nexus generally, including those who object to some aspect of government policy."⁴ Chomsky explains that the media will not protect state managers from the criticisms of powerful corporate elites, who may in fact use the media as a platform for an anti-government position. In the Australian context, a

long-standing, widespread receptivity to anti-government sentiment, concern over unemployment and the economy, and middle-class hostility to [alleged] labour union hegemony created fertile ground for pro-corporate media messages, especially in the case of Olympic sport and the Sydney 2000 project.

The media's occasional self-criticism and reporting of external critiques constitute additional practices that help create what Chomsky terms "necessary illusions," in this case, the illusion of freedom of the press and a democratic society. Debate is carefully managed and contained, and the public is not provided with a full view of the complexities of social problems and the nature and extent of dissident views. Views incompatible with the interests of corporate and government elites are attributed to "special interest groups," which are, in fact, the large social groupings that comprise the majority: women, working class people, unions, etc. Herman and Chomsky further demonstrate how a supply of "experts" is "bought" in order to add legitimacy to media messages that serve elite interests.⁵

It would be relatively easy to identify propaganda if the media only promoted a party line or, alternatively, pushed a specific anti-government position; it is more difficult to do so when there is the illusion of balance, debate or dissent. Despite the Herald's positioning as the most serious of the Sydney newspapers, it has at least two regular columnists, including sports reporter Jeff Wells, who are routinely offensive in their misogyny and racism. However, from time to time, their views come under attack in letters to the editor. In a similar illusion of balance, Australia's best selling sport magazine, Inside Sport, (in)famous for its ten-page "centrefold" pictorials of women in bikinis, has as regular contributors two sport scholars, Colin Tatz and Douglas Booth, who present radically dissenting views on controversial issues, including racism and drugs in sport. In fact, their article on white Australians' racist treatment of Aboriginals, inside and outside sport, was one of the very few to name the hypocrisy of the Sydney 2000 bid supporters who focused on China's human rights abuses and ignored Australia's own shameful record.

However, Inside Sport does not give Tatz and Booth free rein; their proposed article on worker exploitation by major sports shoe companies in developing

countries was rejected on the grounds that the publishers did not want to offend advertisers, although apparently they were unconcerned about offending government sport authorities, or even white Australians in general, when Tatz and Booth tackled the racism issue. The Herald's publication of their original article and their critique of the magazine's editorial policy is a good example of the illusion of media's self-criticism.⁶ While the Herald would no doubt avoid offending its own corporate advertisers, it could afford to take the moral high ground on this issue since sporting goods companies rarely advertise in this paper.

Media Monopolies

In further explicating the propaganda model, Chomsky identified the media monopoly wielded by the 24 "media giants" in the USA in the 1980s including Australia entrepreneur Rupert Murdoch.⁷ The Murdoch company now controls a number of major Australian newspapers, television stations and pay television sports channels. In 1984 Murdoch bought Australian rights to telecast the Los Angeles Games for \$20 million, and made an estimated \$5 - \$10 million profit from sales to subsidiary stations.⁸ A number of Murdoch companies were among the corporate sponsors of the bid for the Sydney 2000 Games.

However, in 1996, a rival television network, Channel Seven, bought exclusive rights to the Atlanta Games for over \$100 million. In what the Herald report termed "a rare show of solidarity," the two losing networks, including Murdoch's, threatened to take joint legal action against the Australian Olympic Committee for "restraint of trade" resulting from the restrictions to their Olympic coverage, even though their journalists had received accreditation. AOC President John Coates instructed Australian athletes not to talk to any other television journalists, while the NSW Premier Bob Carr told Herald reporters that if he were a gold medal winner, he would talk to everyone, and the Minister for Communications refused to comment, saying it was "a matter for the marketplace."⁹ It appears that John Coates had a firmer grasp of the marketplace than the Premier, and the Herald's general pattern of uncritical support for Coates and the AOC was clearly evident in this case.

Power and profit

The Herald's coverage of power struggles between the AOC, the Sydney Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games (SOCOG) and the NSW government provides further evidence of support for corporate interests. In the original terms of the Olympic bid, the NSW government was to provide over \$1 billion for Olympic construction and to make good any losses, and the AOC was to receive 90% of any SOCOG profits to fund Australia's Olympic athlete program. Furthermore, both the NSW government and the AOC had veto power over SOCOG budget. In March 1996, with higher than expected television revenues, the NSW Minister for the Olympics, Michael Knight, sought a change in the agreement so that the NSW government could gain a share of any profit over the estimated \$26 million - which in March was upgraded to \$210 million if other budgeted costs were kept in line.

According to Herald reporter Glenda Korporaal, John Coates, the AOC and the IOC were correct in wanting to "avoid Games revenues being used to pay for long-term facilities for the State," a contradictory statement in view of the way in which the legacy of Olympic facilities is routinely held up as a major benefit to the host city, state and country. Korporaal went on to criticise Knight for "throwing the spotlight" on the AOC's control of 90% of the profit and for "aiding the public perception that the State Government is generously shouldering the financial burden." An AOC official, less subtly, complained that the government was trying to portray the AOC as "money-hungry bastards;"¹⁰ it is relevant to note that AOC assets are valued at \$23m, including a \$7.3m investment in a Queensland casino.¹¹

One might reasonably argue that Knight, as an elected representative, was only doing his job responsibly and competently by trying to gain a bigger share of profits for taxpayers, but clearly it was disturbing to the corporate agenda to mention the AOC's profit in the same breath as the government's considerable financial involvement - approximately one-third of the budget.

Strategically placed adjacent to Korporaal's piece was an article on Atlanta's tight budget, absence of government funding, and the expectation of zero profit for ACOG.¹² Clearly, the reader is expected to admire

Sydney's superior financial organizing, and to be grateful that taxpayers will share in any profit. In the final result, the AOC agreed to give up the power of veto on SOCOG matters in exchange for a guaranteed \$ 100 million of profits, thus forgoing the earlier 90% profit figure. Glenda Korporaal later praised John Coates' business sense in going for the guaranteed sum rather than the unknown percentage.¹³

On the matter of the assumed profit, however, Herald headlines two months later were proclaiming "Sydney \$375m Olympic Blow-out" and "Public Funds for Games up by \$400m."¹⁴ Failure of anticipated private sector funding (\$65m) for several major facilities was blamed, and, predictably, unexpected costs in environmental cleanup to the Homebush Bay site were also cited. Knight defended the additional \$400m in public funding as taxpayers' "investment" in the future. And, lest the corporate sector be offended by the implication that it was shirking its responsibility, a article under the same "Olympic blow-out" banner explained that the NSW Registered Clubs Association, expected to fund the \$23.2m Olympic velodrome, had been suffering from a "misunderstanding" about their right to use Olympic symbols for marketing purposes¹⁵ - this despite the fact that an Australian Senate committee had produced a detailed report on ambush marketing in March 1995.¹⁶ Above the report on the "mix-up," the Herald strategically placed an article about IOC rules on the promotion of Sydney 2000 at Atlanta, and the Atlanta organizing committee's "unusually aggressive tactics" to protect the 1996 sponsors and licensees from ambush marketing.¹⁷ In a followup story a few days later, yet another article on Atlanta's financial problems reported how added security for the 1996 Games were expected to cost the American taxpayer over \$1 billion.¹⁸

In the final word on the Sydney 2000 budget, the government estimate issued in July stated that the Olympic Village would cost at least \$300m less than the original projection, thus significantly decreasing the cost to taxpayers.¹⁹

Sydney 2000 Design

One of the much publicised features of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Bid was the promise of a Green Games, with the design of Olympic facilities to reflect

environmentally friendly principles. Early in 1996, Olympic environmental planning came under attack from a Sydney physics professor, who claimed that lack of design integration between the projects at the Homebush Bay Olympic site had jeopardized the proposed solar-thermal energy plant and diluted the commitment to a Green Games. This was followed by scathing criticism of the design plan by a landscape architecture professor. The Herald devoted extensive coverage to the “expert” critiques: a headline titled “Games vision ‘boring mediocrity’” spanned six columns at the top of the page, even though the story was only two columns wide. The article briefly summarized the government Olympic Coordination Committee’s denials of all these allegations.²⁰ The adjacent article, although covered by the same banner headline, reported on the winners of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Gold Medal Awards - a transparent attempt to link the winning firm of Denton, Corker and Marshall to the Olympic project. This group of “experts” was lavishly praised for their achievements, and much was made of their unique strengths in large commercial projects.²¹

Two weeks later in the Herald, architects again attacked the government for focusing “too narrowly” on price in their tendering of the design work for Olympic buildings. One of the complaints came from the same firm of Denton, Corker and Marshall, who stated that their [presumably superior] standards of work did not allow for cost-cutting, and that therefore they had not been in contention for the tender - a criticism that portrayed the government as bargain-hunters who had missed the opportunity to use the country’s top design team. This time, the Herald reported the government architect’s response more fully, explaining that the preference for NSW firms was aimed at boosting the local building industry and architecture profession.²² Overall, however, more favourable attention was paid to the critics than to the government’s legitimate concerns with cost.

As might be expected, media treatment of environmentalists was not uniformly positive. It occasionally served the anti-government agenda to give them air time - especially if the environmentalist was a university-based “expert” rather than a grassroots activist - but it more often served the corporate agenda to blame them for problems with the Olympic budget

and timetable. For example, in a heated attack on environmentalists (as well as human rights advocates, union leaders and others), an article in the weekend business section of the conservative national newspaper, The Australian, provided a unfettered forum for a “leading construction industry heavyweight,” to lash out at all the so-called “pressure groups” whose interventions, he alleged, would delay progress at the Olympic construction site. According to this Olympic project management director, environmental issues could be taken too far, with the result that the enterprise becomes “uncommercial.” He concluded by warning that unpredictable delays cost money and asking sarcastically, “Who knows if there is someone worried about immigration or the fact that perhaps there are not enough female workers on the site?”²³

This report, dominated by the views of one member of the corporate elite, left readers with the impression that environmental and human rights concerns were alien to the Olympic project, even though at the time of the bid preparation, supporters boasted of Australia’s superior human rights record (in contrast to China’s) and the Greenpeace endorsement of Sydney 2000’s Olympic design.

There are, in fact, a number of disturbing environmental health issues associated with the Sydney 2000 construction. Air, water and noise pollution are significant problems in the Sydney metropolitan area, with commercial aviation and heavy industry in and around the area largely responsible for the problem. Earlier this year, the Herald presented a series of articles on pollution, while aircraft noise, which was the subject of a commission of inquiry, was reported on a daily basis. A higher incidence of respiratory problems has been reported in the western suburbs, where most Olympic events will take place. It is therefore particularly ironic that, in his 1995 book documenting the bid process, the Sydney 2000 Committee’s executive director, Rod McGeoch, attempted to discredit the Beijing bid on these same grounds, that is, that air pollution and dust storms in the Beijing area produced “a strong risk of sinus and bronchial problems as athletes were trying to perform at their physical peak.”²⁴

Two additional points are relevant. Firstly, McGeoch’s

book, which treats the Olympics purely as a business enterprise, was ghost-written by the regular Herald Olympic journalist Glenda Korporaal, whose regular reports dominate that paper's Sydney 2000 coverage - a clear indication of the Herald's commitment to corporate interests. Secondly, the details about Beijing came from a research report that McGeoch had commissioned to uncover and present, in as unfavourable a light as possible, all the problems with the Beijing bid. It was McGeoch's proposed strategy for releasing the document, rather than the document itself, that was more offensive. Intent on mounting a public relations campaign that could not be "sourced back to the Sydney bid," he enlisted the services of a London public relations expert (whom he referred to as his "private weapon"). The plan was to fund a human rights group in London to speak out about China issues and then to publish a book based on the research report - with none of this to be linked to the Sydney bid. The NSW government got wind of the campaign, which they correctly perceived as a threat to Australia-China relations, and McGeoch was forced to abandon the plan. It was clear that he was more concerned about "the millions of dollars in corporate money riding on [the bid's] performance" than the ethics of the situation or the implications for international relations.²⁵

On the question of the Olympic design and athletes' peak performances, as raised by McGeoch in relation to Beijing, it is interesting to note that the running track at the Sydney Olympic site at Homebush is located where prevailing winds will seriously impede athletes' performances. The reason given for this design flaw was that television cameras needed a shadow-free main area and could not be facing the afternoon sun.²⁶ Any doubts about the claim that the Olympics have been reduced to a television spectacle should be dispelled by this example.

Drugs and sport

The predictable pattern in Australian media reports on the use of performance-enhancing drugs in Olympic sport was strongly evident in the period leading up to the 1996 Games. The uncovering of "drug cheats" from Communist countries and big sporting powers such as the USA was hailed as a step forward in the struggle for "clean" international sporting competition, and the culprits were presumed guilty until proven

otherwise. Chinese female swimmers and their famous "V-shaped" physiques were a favourite target, and the establishment of a "rebel world swimming association" to counter FINA's (Federation Internationale de Natation Amateur) alleged inactivity on the Chinese "problem" was sympathetically reported.²⁷

But when Australian athletes tested positive for banned substances, they tended to be treated as innocent victims. At a 1995 international competition, swimmer Samantha Riley was found to have taken a banned prescription headache drug, and while Scott Volkens, the coach who provided it, was banned for four years (subsequently reduced to six months), Riley escaped with only a strong warning. (Volkens' ban conveniently ended a few days before the team left for Atlanta.) Both pleaded ignorance that the drug contained a banned substance. A July 1996 report on drug testing in the Weekend Australian revisited the "ignorance defence" with sympathetic references to Riley and warnings that the ingredients in medications purchased overseas may differ from the same-name Australian product.²⁸

When track athlete Dean Capobianco tested positive for the steroid Stanozolol during pre-Olympic competition in the Netherlands in May 1996, Australian sport officials managed to keep the issue quiet until July 16. Media response was immediate: on July 17 and 18, the Herald, for example, had two front page stories, a front page opinion piece, an editorial and two pages of background articles. These included an unsympathetic chronicle of his performance since 1988, peppered with phrases like "immature race," "lucky to be selected," "a dreadful heat," "sluggish" and "bad form," - a not-so hidden message that he wasn't a medal contender anyway.²⁹ On the sympathetic side, other articles reported on the "sabotage defence" and interviews with his lawyer, his coach and, finally, his mother - all protesting his innocence.

Jeff Wells' opinion piece, offensively titled "Capo falls to the white man's burden," appeared on the front page rather than in its usual place in the sport section." The title referred to Capobianco's perceived potential as the world's fastest white man in the 400m race; Wells implied that he had disappointed [white] Australians by being caught. The "fastest man" title takes on further significance in light of current debates about the 100m

versus 200m race as determining that status.

One Herald article made much of the “official gag” and the “legal stranglehold” wherein the AOC and John Coates prohibited the Australian team from talking to the press about Capobianco on threat of expulsion from the Games. Near the end, the article finally explained that the Olympic Athlete Agreement, already signed by all team members, forbade talk about any matter apart from their own performance.³¹ However, the Herald failed to report that Coates had ignored infringements of the agreement by Australian swimmer Nicole Stevenson just one week earlier, when she had aired her views on the drug habits of the Chinese women swimmers.³² It is also relevant that Samantha Riley’s press conference - according to the Herald editorial, Australia’s response to Chinese sport officials’ underhand attempts to “exploit” the Riley incident³³ - had been held one day before the Capobianco incident became public. Faced with a “decidedly sympathetic” international press, Riley had duly avoided answering questions about drugs and had focused on her own performance and prospects.³⁴

Maintaining the illusion of self-criticism, Herald reporter Patrick Smith discussed how Australia risked being labelled either hypocritical or naive by criticising drug cheats in other countries while suffering the embarrassment of positive tests for two of its own athletes, Riley and Capobianco.³⁵ In the pre-Olympic period, however, this kind of commentary was rarely found in the mass media.

Strategies for change

In discussing effective challenges to mass media monopoly of public opinion, Chomsky identified the potential of community and workplace organizations and non-profit radio and television to broaden public debate and provide a forum for dissent. In the general Australian climate of uncritical celebration of Olympic sport and the Sydney 2000 Olympics, dissenting voices are extremely rare in the Australian media. In one of the few exceptions, an article in the May 1996 issue of Green Left presented “Ten reasons to oppose all Olympic Games.” As well as presenting strategies for change, including transforming the ethos of competitive sport and developing new forms of cooperative games, it was suggested that critical people

should boycott Olympic sponsors, mount political protests and refuse to watch or show any interest in Olympic sport.³⁶ In light of the blatant manipulation of public opinion, documented above, in which the Herald and other mass media engaged in 1996, it is clear that such challenges are sorely needed.

Note: all dollar figures refer to Australian dollars, valued at approximately \$1.05 Canadian.

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