

THE MELBOURNE PRESS AND THE MOSCOW OLYMPICS

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"And the Press, when the Olympic Games appear on the horizon once more...does its best to destroy all sense of proportion and sanity of judgement in the country. The daily papers live on the gentle art of fostering excitement, and no sooner do they perceive a healthy interest springing up among the general public, then they set to work to exaggerate and caricature that interest until it becomes ridiculous..."¹

INTRODUCTION

The Melbourne newspaper coverage of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games was arguably the most protracted, voluminous and extensive treatment ever, of a sporting event in the history of journalism in Victoria. From September 1971 the four Melbourne dailies, *The Age*, *The Australian*, *The Sun News Pictorial* and *The Herald*, published no less than 1007 articles² related directly to the staging of the Olympic Games in Moscow. No fewer than 188 contributors, including journalists, editors, special writers and overseas correspondants contributed over 570 articles with by-lines. Nine³ regular contributors wrote more than 230 articles or 40% of acknowledged work.

Morrow and Waters argue that:

"Newspapers are implicitly accepted as the major, common source of information about sport history..."

yet advocate a 'content-analysis methodology for drawing inferences from the plethora of available newspaper data. The intensity of news coverage, fuelled by international and domestic crises, saw the Moscow Olympics occupying the principal pages of Melbourne's newspapers from January to August 1980. This paper attempts to examine to what extent Melbourne newspapers met their perceived functions by an examination of several factors including content, editorials, layout, cartoons, news sources, public access and the journalists' strike.

For a full consideration of the role the press played in the public awareness of the Moscow Olympics a thorough study should take account of the function of the press, the concept of news, the readership and the short and long term influences of the press. For this paper however, only a brief review of these issues is possible to set a foundation upon which judgements may be made.

FUNCTIONS OF THE PRESS

Little concensus is apparent on a single most important function. Mayer suggests that

"On the whole, talk about Press functions is not fruitful; it...turns out to be most thinly disguised assertion about what someone thinks the Press *should* do and is quite arbitrary."⁵

It may still be worthwhile however, to consider the range of views held, as they may very well provide insights into the press treatment of the Olympic boycott issue.

The view of the press as a public utility considers national integration as its purpose; here the divisional or anarchistic potential of the press is discouraged. Milshteyn and Molchanov reflect this view;

"A many-sided system for the propogation of physical culture and sport has been established in the U.S.S.R....the most important element of this system is the press. ...In general one may say that the Soviet press in a many-sided and exhaustive, objective and unbiased (sic) manner throws a light on international sport..."⁶

Cozens and Stumpf⁷held in 1953, that the press was a social institution, yet thirty years earlier the American Newspaper Publishers Association declared otherwise; they said

"The newspaper industry is a strictly private business which is not charged with any public use or interest."⁸

It would, indeed, be rather foolish of Australian newspaper publishers to profess the latter motive today. More likely, a

compromise between the public utility and the business-only views would be their stated policy.

Additional a priori views of the function of the press, which are often in conflict, include the aims to report and interpret events, provide commentary and guidance on matters of perceived public interest, provide information and entertainment, provide a forum for public expression and exchange of opinion, express its own opinion and publish news.

In consideration of the psychological functions of the press there appears to be a concensus of two views; namely the creator and the mirror effect of public values and attitudes. Thompson' supports the mirror view as he refers to the press as "attitude propping" while Macintosh and Inglis suggest that the press has the capacity not only to inform but also to instruct. Macintosh believes that:

"The mass media incontrovertibly contribute to the understanding of sport across national frontiers."¹⁰

and asks

"Does this increased understanding and knowledge increase goodwill or ill will?... How is their balance affected by the mass media?"¹¹

In taking a more cynical stand on the creator view of certain British newspapers Inglis felt that;

"These newspapers are manipulative to the extent that they peddle a view of society compounded about equally of gossip and impotence..."¹²

conducive to a "sense of helpless participation" on behalf of the readership.

THE CONCEPT OF NEWS

Baker reports on a recent survey of Australian journalists to ascertain their views on the concept of what constitutes news. Opinions varied from the 'don't know' of a foreign correspondent, through whatever may be defined as eventful, new or unusual,

whatever might have mass appeal, whatever the management or editors decide to publish to whatever 'interests me'. Baker concluded that for many, the question of what is news had never been put to them and he found that, furthermore,

"...journalists are uncomfortable when asked to explain news as a concept."¹³

THE READERSHIP

Milshteyn and Molchanov suggest that to assess the effect of the press on its readers

"...it is absolutely necessary to acquaint oneself with the structure of the reader's interests...Indispensible is an analysis of their reaction to the material read by them, (and) an analysis of the depth and range of perception."

Mayer suggests however that rational responses to the purpose and effect of the press, to inform and instruct, are often superficial, that non-rational reasons may predominate readership. Some readers use the paper as a tool for living, to discover what is on at the drive-in, television or the theatre, who is listed in the obituaries, whilst others regard newspaper reading as an escape, a ritual time-killing exercise, a source of social prestige, a vicarious romp with celebrities or support for a well-read image. He even suggests that newspapers are chosen often for their size; can they be read on the train? Are they big enough to wrap up the household rubbish?¹⁵

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PRESS

As a hot¹⁶ medium the newspaper offers relatively little opportunity for public involvement when compared to the cool media of television and radio. Its influence is difficult to isolate in the company of radio and television and furthermore may be complicated by the nature of published material to be of a feast-famine character, not conducive to an instructional process. In some instances one may be led to conclude that press influence may be short term rather than enduring, often attempting cumulative osmosis rather than active education.

The mirror view of the press implies confirmation rather than active influence; the creator view may fall short of its intention by influencing only a few of its readers one way or another. Nevertheless such a small percentage may indeed yield considerable influence themselves. It is in the light of such considerations that the analysis of published material on the Moscow Olympic is made.

CONTENT

Rumblings of discontent with Soviet capacity to stage the 1980 Games and Soviet socio-political ideologies and policies appeared as early as October 1974,¹⁷ but in the main, press treatment of the Moscow Olympics remained relatively benign to the end of 1979. Max Harris referred to the remarkable absence of "critical debate"¹⁸ in Australia and "a few doddling newspaper editorials"¹⁹ during this period.

In January 1980 the Soviet move into Afghanistan suddenly gave the press a new dimension of coverage; all dailies stepped up their commitment to the Games and related issues with extraordinary enthusiasm. The quantity of material was immense; *The Age* devoted eight times as much column space in January than it did in December; other dailies made similar commitments as political correspondents, foreign correspondents, special writers, travel, sports and general editors became more involved.

NEWS SOURCE

An overwhelming imbalance in favour of American, British and West European sources suggested an unreasonable bias as Melbourne papers published articles directly lifted from the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time* magazine and *Newsday*; The argument gaining further substance as Gerald Long, managing director of Reuters, visiting Melbourne said;

'...the Olympics should be abolished.
International sport led to misunderstanding
between people and created bad blood ...The
teams were not getting together in a spirit

of friendship; in fact, they all hated one another's guts...everything I have seen of international sport makes me think it does the opposite to promoting international amity..."²⁰

Long's interviewer from *The Age* commented that the Reuter's chief "prizes journalism for detachment."²¹

It was probably most fortunate for the future of detached journalism that much of the newspaper copy was from sources originating in Australia; at least the news could be free from that added censorship subjected to overseas material. Overseas news sources of the Australian Associated Press are drawn primarily from the United Kingdom, the United States and Western Europe. Baker 22 found that approximately 65% of material available to the Australian Associated Press arises from these sources, with whom it is considered Australia shares 'cultural connections'. In sharp contrast, only 1.5% of its material is derived from the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe; less in fact, than the United Nations, Central America and the Pacific.

Such in-built selectivity is of great significance when one considers the concept of freedom of the press. Baker adds that for the Australian Associated Press

"All incoming copy is examined by AAP journalists in Sydney..."²³

and that in Melbourne there is evidence of sifting, summarizing cutting and re-writing. The same is expected of other news services, of which Melbourne papers made much less use; they include Associated Press, Reuters, United Press International and Agence France Press.

EDITORIAL COMMENT

Of the initial 1980 editorials *The Australian* had the earliest; commenting that

"Many nations, headed by the United States are itching to slap the Kremlin's face..."²⁴

Later, its adamant calls to "Shift the Olympics" referred to Soviet policies as "aggressive, repressive and brutal"²⁵ and then "arrogant and morally bankrupt,"²⁶

The Herald joined with "disgust at the Soviets' naked aggression"²⁷ and *The Age* recommended "a concerted world boycott."²⁸

The Australian maintained a vehemence throughout from the provocative April 19-20th comment that

"Dawn Fraser has not taken up our offer to send her to Pakistan so that she could find out for herself...what is going on in Afghanistan... she says she cannot go because of business commitments."²⁹

to the melodramatic May 10-11th view of the Australian Olympic Federation's role;

"The ultimate decision will be made in less than two weeks and a body of ordinary Australians will never have to make a more important one."³⁰

It spoke of;

"...the deep divisions in our society which will be caused by the decision."³¹

on May 24,25th and the presence of *The Australian's* reporters in Moscow for the Games was rationalized by its July 22nd editorial which stated;

". . . it is our job to report the news whether we like the news or not."³²

Under the heading "Triumph in Moscow" its July 26-27th editorial concluded on the men's medley swimming gold medal;

"Four young men, representing their country in the best way they know, have made their fellow Australians walk a little taller today. We congratulate them."³³

The Herald supporting the notion of an effective boycott throughout,³⁴ felt that the Australian Olympic Federation's 6-5 decision was wrong,³⁵ and conjectured about hidden realities, mysteries, disguise and the ticking of

". . .a time bomb of fear, suspicion, aggression and military preparedness beyond our comprehension of horror,"³⁶

as a backdrop of the opening ceremonies.

The Age, in a much less xenophobic posture attempted to point out the dangers of over-amplification and exaggeration of Soviet threats³⁷ but maintained its support for a boycott³⁸ and regret over the Australian Olympic Federation's decision. To its credit

The Age published the sports editorials of Rod Usher, which ran counter to its general editorial opinion on the boycott issues. Usher's editorials appeared on 1st February, 19th April and 18th June 1980.

The Age also published no less than 80 letters-to-the-editor between July 1978 and July 1980 and no less than 187 *Access Age* telephoned commentaries on the Olympic issues.

Of the three Melbourne newspapers publishing editorials, *The Age* was the least emotive and toward Olympism, the least iconoclastic. Although it is difficult to assess the specific impact of editorial opinion on members of the Australian Olympic Federation or the public it is clear that all papers attempted to encourage support for a boycott over a considerable period of time,

LAYOUT

The space available for a daily newspaper is finite and pages are designed according to editorial policy. The newspaper treatment of the Olympics issues must be considered in the light of page space available for each article, regular features and advertisement.

Given the limitations of space, all newspapers attempt to display the intended image as effectively as possible, through the use of headlines, sub-headings and typefaces. Typefaces usually diminish in size as an article progresses; the reducing boldness in print is likely to discourage continuing reading of an article, leaving the reader at best with a limited precis of an entire report. Sub-headings appear to be used to regenerate a declining interest in an article, while headlines have several, often conflicting functions; to summarize a story, attract a reader to it or enhance the layout of the page.

Often a headline appeared to attempt to do one or more of these things yet seemed to sacrifice accuracy in the following article. Consider *The Herald's* "TEAM 'LIKELY' TO PULL OUT" headline of January 25th 1980; the sports editor reported;

"The Federal Government's call for an Olympic boycott had its first positive response today with the volleyball players declaring themselves "highly unlikely" to go to Moscow."³⁹

The Age published its response the following morning under a quarter-inch leader "MOSCOW BOYCOTT QUALIFIED:"

"We can reveal that they (the volleyball players) definitely will not be going...both men's and women's teams failed to qualify."⁴⁰

Under the headline "The Games that Hitler played" on February 9th 1980, *The Age* Hamburg correspondent, Gerald Stewart faltered; in reference to 1936 he said;

"The Berlin Summer Games were...preceded by the Winter Games in Norway...they were unable to attract much publicity."⁴¹

Little wonder; the 1936 Winter Olympics were held at Garmisch - Partenkirchen in Bavaria:

On May 5th 1980 the front page headline "Olympians massacred"⁴² appeared to attempt to arouse interest in what turned out to be synthesis of barely related incidents. It was an example of what Meyer refers to as:

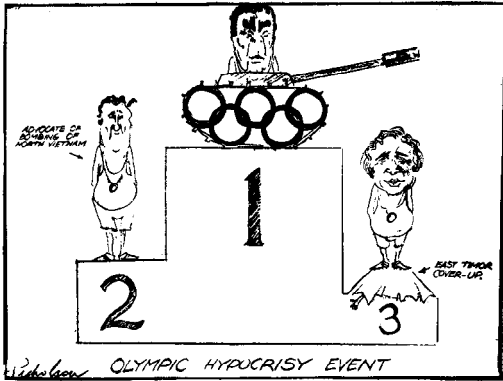
"...the more or less spicy sauce on the normally less tasty dishes."⁴⁵

Similarly *The Herald* used "TOP OLYMPIC CHIEF RESIGNS"⁴⁴ as its page one banner headline on May 27th 1980. As it was only four days after the Australian Olympic Federation's decision to send a team to Moscow, a reader could have been excused in judging the headline to mean one of the Federation executive. Not so, the person was Bill Young, president of the New South Wales Olympic Council.

The use of headlines as image projection could well be considered with *The Sun* "NEWS OFF TO MOSCOW - Remember the Nazis, says Fraser, "⁴⁵*The Age's* "Day One to the Red Army"⁴⁶ and *The Herald's* "Gold - for mum and Australia."⁴⁷ and "MEDAL GIRL MICHELLE SOBS - They can't take this away from me."⁴⁸

CARTOONS

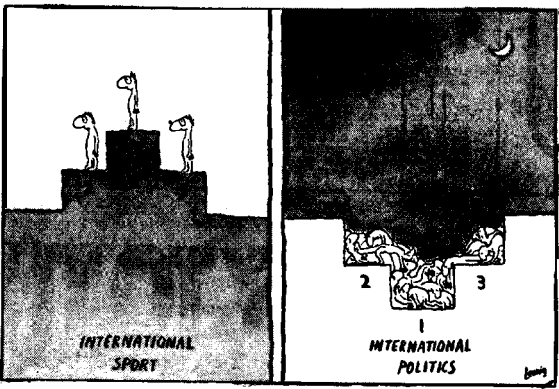
The Melbourne newspapers made continuous use of the Moscow



Nicholson
 "The Age"
 15.2.80 p.10



Nicholson
 "The Age"
 16.1.80 p.10



Leunig
 "The Age"
 19.3.80 p.13

Olympic issues in cartoons, particularly between January and August 1980. Jobling, in his 1976 paper entitled "The Daily Press Cartoonist's Use of Sport" regarded cartoons as;

'...vehicles for humour and ridicule they usually entertain as well as exert an influence on the public.'⁴⁹

When asked what makes a good cartoon, Ron Tandberg of *The Age* regarded "a strong message"⁵⁰ as important. When asked if bias and distortion are necessary ingredients, he replied.

'...essential...they'd look like an editorial otherwise...' ⁵¹

The power of the cartoon to influence public opinion has not been thoroughly researched here, but for the purpose of this paper the nature of the material used by ten cartoonists in the four Melbourne dailies may be examined in terms of intention to influence.

Although an occasional cartoon was rather lighthearted, the majority of themes seemed underpinned by pessimism or cynicism. Leunig, Jeff Hooke, Tandberg, Nicholson, Oliphant and Pickering all used the Olympic dias⁵² as a means to express strong opinions. Collette, Weg, Nicholson and Pickering used Prime Minister Fraser as the Olympics' dark antagonist.⁵³ Spooner, Collette, and Hooke took up an assortment of causes including Soviet dissidents, Brezhnev and secret police.⁵⁴ However, Pickering's prolific work seems to have been aimed at engendering some of the more stronger anti-Soviet, xenophobic reactions.⁵⁵

THE JOURNALISTS' STRIKE

Following the sacking of 28 sub-editors at *The Australian* on May 13th 1980 journalists went on strike for thirty-one days. Potentially the four Melbourne daily newspapers were without the most substantial newsgathering sources on the domestic aspects of the Moscow Olympics issue. The Australian Olympic Federation was to meet at the Sheraton Hotel in Melbourne, on Friday, May 23rd for its final decision on whether to send an official Australian team to Moscow. The newspapers were forced to gather news from radio and television broadcasts and rely on A.O.F. press releases for ten days prior to and three weeks

following that most important meeting.

The journalists, in the meantime published seven editions of *The Journalists' Clarion*, described as "the strike newspaper of the Australian Journalists Association (Victorian Branch)" and covered the May 23rd A.O.F. meeting. Rintoul of *The Sun* and Haley of *The Age* reported in the third edition of *The Journalists' Clarion*

"We believe that Mr. Syd Grange, president of the Australian Olympic Federation, and its secretary-general, Mr. Judy Patching were among the five men who voted for a boycott."⁵⁶

Their beliefs were based on:

'...notes abandoned in the boardroom of the Sheraton Hotel...These discarded papers, most of them screwed up or torn, were left in the room when the meeting ended."⁵⁷

Access seems surprising; *The Age* on Saturday 24th May referred to a "closely guarded boardroom"⁵⁸ and reported;

"The breakdown of the final vote will not be made public?"⁵⁹

Rintoul and Haley's material was not considered for examination or publication in any of the major Melbourne newspapers. It is the writer's belief, that under the circumstances of limited availability of news, the major newspapers were duty-bound to consider the material contained in *The Journalists' Clarion*; by not doing so, they contributed to a partial eclipse of the newsworthy.

To the contrary, Sam Lipski believed:

"...*The Age*, during the strike, was not only a readable paper; in some ways it was a more readable paper."⁶⁰

Laurie Oakes of *The Clarion* revealed that, in supporting the striking journalists, the Australian Labor Party had

"...declined to talk to representatives of the papers and AAP...they have also refrained from issuing statements to them...The Government, on the other hand, has had a field day...As a result, Mr. Fraser's attack on the AOF decision dominated the newspapers, while Mr. Hayden's comments supporting the decision to send a team to Moscow did not get a run."⁶¹

Such an unfortunate set of circumstances led to a further imbalance of news presentation.

With the Australian team's arrival in Moscow and the subsequent Olympic competition the major newspapers devoted the majority of their coverage to sports journalism, with its extremes of quality of writing and the usual fare of melodrama, intrigue and cliches, spiced with the "Red-under-the-bed" skepticism. Ron Clarke, writing for *The Age* spoke of the Western media treatment of the Games; there were;

' ...constant endeavours to challenge the organisation, morals of the hosts and the standard of competition...these attacks degenerated into dissertation against the whole Olympic movement...⁶²

He said of press comment on cheating by Soviet athletes and officials, that they were misreports

' ...typical of some of the manifestations which flowed from Moscow during the last three weeks; reports which earned little credit for the independant Press of the Western world."⁶³

Indeed misreporting was compounded at a later date when Adrian McGregor's retrospective and inaccurate view of the Olympic Games concluded in *The Australian* that;

' ...Moscow was the ultimate sacrifice when, by the sacrifice of legions of athletes, Australia at last stood tall beside the US, Japan and West Germany on the international boycott dias."⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

With few exceptions the Melbourne newspaper treatment of the Moscow Olympics did little to promote international goodwill. In general, it provided a biased presentation of available news and contributed to an ambience of anti-Soviet feeling. A limited degree of opportunity for public discourse seemed to do little to prevent an air of skepticism, cynicism and confusion prevailing over the relationship between sport and politics.

NOTES:

1. Watson, E.H. Lacon, *Notes and Memories of a Sports Reporter* (Herbert Joseph, London, 1930), p.230.
2. For the purpose of this paper articles are considered as newspaper contributions of approximately six or more column inches in length.
3. Regular contributors included: Geoff Barker, Simon Balderstone, Ron Carter, Ron Clarke and Jim Webster for *The Age*, Richard Sleeman for *The Australian*, John Craven, Lawrie Kavanagh and Bob MacDonald for *The Herald*.
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5. Mayer, H., *The Press in Australia*, (Lansdowne, Melbourne, 1968), p.53.
6. Milshteyn, O.A. & Molchanov, S.V., "The Shaping of Public Opinion Regarding Sport by the Mass Media as a Factor Promoting International Understanding", *International Review of Sport Sociology*, (1976), p.72.
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9. Thompson, D., *Discrimination and Popular Culture*, (Pelican, 1964), p.90.
10. Macintosh, P.C., "Mass Media : Friends and Foes in Sport", *Quest*, Monograph XXII, Spring, June, 1974, p.35.
11. *Ibid.*, p.35.
12. Inglis, F., *The Name of the Game*, (Heinemann, London, 1977),p.93.
13. Baker, I., "The Gatekeeper Chain : A Two-Step Analysis of How Journalists Acquire and Apply Organizational News Priorities", in Edgar, P., *The News in Focus - The Journalism of Exception* (Macmillan, Melbourne, 1980), p.140.
14. Milshteyn & Molchanov, *loc. cit.*, p.81.

15. Mayer, *op.cit.*, p.260.
16. Birrell, S. & Loy, J.W., "Media Sport : Hot and Cool" in *International Review of Sport Sociology*, Vol. 14, (1979), p.6.
17. *The Age*, 26th October 1974.
18. *The Australian*, 9-10th September 1978.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *The Age*, 16th February 1980.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Baker, I., "The Rip and Read Service : AAP, a Study of a News Agency" in Edgar, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
24. *The Australian*, 7th January 1980.
25. *The Australian*, 26-27th January 1980.
26. *The Australian*, 1st February 1980.
27. *The Herald*, 22nd January 1980.
28. *The Age*, 24th January 1980.
29. *The Australian*, 19-20th April 1980.
30. *The Australian*, 10-11th May 1980.
31. *The Australian*, 24-25th May 1980.
32. *The Australian*, 22nd July 1980.
33. *The Australian*, 26-27th July 1980.
34. *The Herald*, 13th February 1980, 22nd February 1980, 21st April 1980.
35. *The Herald*, 26th May 1980, 29th May 1980.
36. *The Herald*, 21st July 1980.
37. *The Age*, 14th February 1980.
38. *The Age*, 15th April 1980, 21st April 1980, 24th May 1980.
39. *The Herald*, 25th January 1980.
40. *The Age*, 26th January 1980.
41. *The Age*, 9th February 1980.

42. *The Age*, 5th May 1980.
43. Mayer, *op.cit.* p.110.
44. *The Herald*, 27th May 1980
45. *The Sun*, 24th May 1980
46. *The Age*, 21st July 1980
47. *The Herald*, 25th July 1980
48. *The Herald*, 22nd July 1980
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53. *The Herald*, 19th June 1980; *The Herald*, 17th June 1980; *The Age*, 25th January 1980; *The Age*, 15th February. 1980; *The Australian*, 26-27th April 1980; *The Australian*, 21st-22nd June 1980.
54. *The Age*, 21st March 1980; *The Herald*, 24th January 1980, *The Herald*, 7th February 1980; *The Sun*, 22nd July 1980, *The Sun*, 4th August 1980.
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56. *The Journalists' Clarion*, Vol. 1,
57. *Ibid.*
58. *The Age*,
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62. *The Age*, 8th August 1980.
63. *Ibid.*
64. *The Australian*, 30th - 31st May 1981.