

THE MELBOURNE PRESS AND THE 1980 MOSCOW OLYMPIC BOYCOTT CONTROVERSY

MICHAEL YOUNG
ARMADALE

I

When in December 1979, the Soviet Union mobilised its armed forces to occupy Afghanistan, the United States, in response to these actions, attempted to negotiate by, among other measures, organising a large scale boycott of the forthcoming Olympic Games in Moscow. This call for a boycott of the Moscow Olympics was zealously adopted by the Australian government and led to a long and emotional struggle between it and the Australian Olympic Federation. The role of the Melbourne press in influencing public opinion on the issue has been examined by John Deane in an earlier volume of this journal.¹ However, the presentation here adopts a more quantitative approach and raises some different questions. Modelled on a study by Edgar and Smith of the role of the press during the 1975 federal election campaign, a test case was designed to analyse the position of the Melbourne daily press during a sample period of the Moscow Olympic boycott controversy in 1980.

II

The research technique incorporated in this study is one commonly referred to as content analysis and is aimed at systematically measuring the content of various forms of communication. The method chosen to examine the nature of newspaper bias during the 1980 Olympic boycott controversy was modelled on that used by Patricia Edgar, Alan Smith and a group of research students from La Trobe University in surveying the nature of press bias leading up to the 1975 federal elections.² The methodology chosen by Edgar and Smith utilized the traditional approach of content analysis, but also incorporated an opinion focus element in an attempt to differentiate between the positive, negative and balanced (or neutral) nature of the material being surveyed.

The survey focused on four major daily newspapers circulating in Melbourne (*The Sun*, *The Herald*, *The Age*, and *The Australian*) and was conducted over a period of seven weeks from 14 April to 7 June, 1980. This time period was chosen for a number of reasons. First, a series of public opinion polls published in *The Age* and *The Herald* from February to June indicated that public opinion had swung significantly in favour of a boycott during the months of April to June, in contrast to those opinion polls held prior to April. Second, the survey period covers the impact of some of the more crucial decisions made by the U.S.A. and its western allies during the controversy. Third, the survey period covers the last five weeks leading up to the A.O.F.'s 6-5 vote to participate in Moscow and the two weeks following this highly controversial decision.

Information was recorded by measuring the column centimetres devoted to the Olympic boycott controversy and divided into news (both bylined and non-bylined), editorials and special comment. The material was measured and then subdivided into textual and photographic content. All material was then categorised into an opinion focus format so that some broad distinction could be made between material that was positive, negative and neutral in relation to the issue. This was necessary because a straightforward measurement of column centimetres cannot hope to identify any changing trends in newspaper bias or editorial policy. Although the method of classifying each particular opinion focus may be seen as subjective, it can be used to identify major trends and hence serve as a basis for more specific content examination. The content analysis included not only column centimetres of press coverage but also an analysis of photographs, cartoons, editorials and front page headlines. However, before the results of the study are examined, it is necessary to consider briefly the respective styles of each of the four daily newspapers surveyed.

The Age and *The Australian* are commonly referred to as 'quality' newspapers because their style is systematic, relatively detached and impersonal.³ Moreover, their reporting style tends to concentrate on political and economic issues and their implications as well as more topical events. Both *The Age* and *The Australian* consistently publish editorials which, although varying widely in context, are generally analytical and probing. However, the newspapers

differ in that *The Australian* is a national publication and is hence more concerned with events of national interest (such as the political and economic news from Canberra) whilst *The Age* is largely concerned with issues and events that directly affect its Victorian readers.

The Herald and *The Sun*, on the other hand, are aimed at a different type of reader and hence display a different style than either *The Age* or *The Australian*. *The Herald* "presents its readers with novel angles on essentially familiar stories", such as strikes, earthquakes, fires and other human interest stories.⁴ Hence, the issues it raises are fairly simple, easily recognizable and repeatable. Generally, *The Herald* is less critical than either *The Australian* or *The Age* and therefore tends to support and promote the status quo. Items such as parliamentary coverage, national news, and international news tend to be thin, widely scattered throughout and generally given a low priority in *The Herald*.

The Sun is similar in many ways to *The Herald* in style, although it concentrates more heavily on pictorial content. *The Sun* tends to focus on stories that lend themselves to pictorial events such as sports, catastrophies and royal tours. *The Sun* rarely publishes editorials, but has regular segments for teenagers, housewives, and travel enthusiasts, as well as focusing heavily on human interest stories. The language of *The Sun* is relatively simple, the sentences short, the headlines 'catchy' and the pictures bold. According to O'Hara, *The Sun* "emphasises the bizarre aspects of human nature with naivety, reflected in pictures of babies, children, small animals and pretty but discreetly dressed girls."⁵

III

From the textual material a number of trends were identified. First, all newspapers devoted a significant percentage of their content to negatively focused material. In fact, in *The Sun* (49.6%), *The Herald* (51%), and *The Australian* (85.4%) most of the content was negatively focused. However, it would appear that *The Age* (37.4%) demonstrated a more balanced approach to the Olympic boycott issue by devoting the majority of its content to a neutral opinion focus. Second, *The Sun* and *The Herald* devoted a significant proportion of

Table I: Bylined and Non-Bylined News

		Negative	Positive	Neutral	Total
AGE	cms	1821	638	2408	4867
	%	37.4	13.1	49.5	100
SUN	cms	1468	408	1082	2958
	%	49.6	13.8	36.6	100
HERALD	cms	1973	634	1257	3864
	%	51.0	16.4	32.6	100
AUSTRALIAN	cms	2099	82	275	2456
	%	85.4	3.3	11.3	100

Table II: Front Page Content

		Negative	Positive	Neutral	Total
AGE	No. Items	16	-	10	26
	cms	1274	-	547	1821
	%	70.0	-	30.0	100
SUN	No. Items	4	1	1	6
	cms	447	356	39	842
	%	53.1	42.3	4.6	100
HERALD	No. Items	13	1	3	17
	cms	1190	80	142	1412
	%	84.3	5.7	10.1	100
AUSTRALIAN	No. Items	13	-	3	16
	cms	1047	-	121	1168
	%	89.6	-	10.4	100

Table III: Editorial Coverage

		Negative	Positive	Neutral	Total
AGE	cms	96	36	-	132
	%	72.7	27.3	-	100
SUN	cms			-	
	%			-	
HERALD	cms	81		-	81
	%	100		-	100
AUSTRALIAN	cms	280		-	280
	%	100		-	100

Table III represents the accumulated results of editorial coverage in cms of space and as a % of the negative, positive and neutral content for each of the four daily newspapers.

their content to neutrally focused material. Once again, *The Sun* and *The Herald* demonstrated similar results, but *The Age* (49.5%) and *The Australian* (11.3%) exhibited a vastly different response. Consequently, it would appear initially that *The Age* (unlike *The Australian*) had demonstrated that it was capable of exercising both responsibility and objectivity.

Third, all the newspapers surveyed demonstrated limited positively focused content. *The Age* (13.1%), *The Sun* (13.8%) and *The Herald* (16.4%) all displayed a great deal of consistency in this area whilst *The Australian* (3.3%) displayed very little interest in publishing positively focused stories. The results for the four newspapers surveyed indicate that news selected was largely negatively or neutrally focused.

In the context of the results of Table I, it would appear initially that *The Age* had consistently offered its readers a more balanced variety of opinion focused material. However, after further investigation of the front page content of the four daily newspapers (Table II), it was found that 70% of material relating to the Olympic boycott issue in *The Age* was negatively focused, 30% was

neutrally focused and none of the front page material was positively focused.

This trend towards strategically 'burying' news material within *The Age* confirms similar trends identified by Edgar and Smith in their survey of the 1975 Federal election campaign. Therefore, since many newspaper readers tend to focus most of their attention on the front page and selected pages of interest with the paper, such as the editorial section or the back pages for sport, they may receive a significantly less 'balanced' perspective of the issue than the initial content analysis would indicate.

Finally, an opinion focused analysis of editorial content within the four newspapers was conducted. Editorials, in theory, represent the collective opinions of the editorial staff, the working journalists and the proprietors. Therefore, by their nature, they are largely opinionated and thus biased in favour of selected points of view.

From Table III, it can be seen that, like the bylined and non-bylined news, most of the editorial material was negatively focused. *The Age* published 72.7% of negatively focused material whilst *The Herald* and *The Australian* published only negatively focused editorial material. *The Sun* does not generally publish editorials and did not do so during the survey period. These findings indicate that, once again, *The Age* was more prepared to offer its readers a balanced range of opinion focused material on the boycott issue than any of the other three newspapers.

Possibly some of the best examples of news material which, in Deane's terms, "contributed to an ambience of anti-Soviet feeling" was that published during the two weeks of actual Olympic competition in Moscow. Throughout the two weeks of the Moscow Games, various claims of cheating by the Russian track and field officials appeared in the western press.⁶ These claims culminated in *The Herald's* (31/7/80) headline "Soviets cheat - Games Claim" and reported that "Anger over judging decisions and other irregularities... simmering since the Games began... burst through at the Lenin Stadium today."⁷ The story outlined claims that Soviet officials had coached Soviet athletes and given them signals as to wind direction and velocity during the men's pole vault event. Similarly, *The*

Herald claimed that the Australian triple jumper, Ian Campbell, had been robbed of a certain gold medal after his fourth jump was fouled during the jumping movement.

Other claims accused the Soviets of opening a huge gate at one end of the stadium whenever a Soviet javelin thrower was in action (providing a tail wind which added to their distances) and closing it when other competitors were throwing. Finally, Soviet officials were said to "have 'egged on' their competitors in the high jump and 'short measured' a discus throw giving a Russian a gold medal over a Brazilian".⁸ The International Amateur Athletic Federation (I.A.A.F.) denied all claims of cheating and pointed out that there were fewer protests in the Games than in any of the past three Olympics.⁹ It would seem that these accusations of cheating by the Soviet officials were based on both the journalist's ignorance of track and field events and a desire to manufacture anti-Soviet bias. Chris Wardlaw, one of Australia's marathon entrants at the Moscow Games, pointed out in his article entitled "Memories of Mishka, Moscow and Malcolm's meddling" that "the Games HAD to be controversial and if we can paint the Russians as cheats then all has not been lost."¹⁰ Both Wardlaw and Ron Clarke (who was writing for *The Age* during the Games) worked hard to dispel some of the more ridiculous allegations of cheating in Moscow.

First, in relation to the javelin tunnel saga, Wardlaw pointed out that, aerodynamically, tailwinds hamper the flight of a javelin and that the gates were also opened for the East Germans. In support of this, Clarke claimed that the prevailing wind during these events was blowing across the flight path of the javelin on the days and that, in any case, a breeze entering an open stadium would have minimal effect on a projectile travelling at an altitude of 50 feet.¹¹ Second, Clarke indicated that allegations of biased marking in other throwing events were all closely examined on slow motion video replays by the B.B.C. and found to be unsupported. Finally, the disqualification of Ian Campbell's fourth in the triple jump, which may have been an honest mistake on the grounds of what Clarke refers to as "a stupid rule anyhow (scraping the ground on the way through cannot be of any assistance),"¹² is hardly ground for accusations of cheating. In contrast, Wardlaw pointed out that the Soviet walker who was disqualified only three kilometres from the

stadium in the 20 km. walk event never made it into our press. Therefore, these manifestations "earned little credit for the independent press of the Western world."¹³

IV

The non-textual material surveyed included the photographic and cartoon content related to the boycott issue. In respect to the photographic material surveyed, it was interesting to find that *The Age* (47.2%), *The Sun* (40.4%) and *The Herald* (45.7%) all published more positive material than either negative or neutral material. Only *The Australian* devoted a consistently higher proportion of photographic space (79%) to negatively focused material.

Therefore, unlike the opinion focus analysis of the textual material in *The Age*, *The Sun* and *The Herald* it was found that newspapers tended to favour the publication of positively focused visual material even if it was usually accompanied by negatively focused textual content. For example, on May 24th (the day following the A.O.F.'s 6-5 majority vote to attend the Moscow Games), *The Age* published the front page headline "Yes to Moscow Games", together with a large photograph (78 column cms) of three smiling key A.O.F. executives Mr. Judy Patching (Secretary-General, Mr. Syd Grange (President) and Mr. David McKenzie (delegate to the I.O.C.)¹⁴ In contrast, the accompanying story questioned the moral judgement of the A.O.F.'s decision and highlighted the following emotional response by the Prime Minister, Mr. Fraser "I pray that those Olympians who do go to Moscow will not pay the price that many of those who went to the Berlin Olympics paid once the war started in 1939."¹⁵

Although it is difficult to understand this seemingly obvious inconsistency between the opinion focus of textual and non-textual material, one explanation might be that such photographs were published in order to highlight the opposing interests of the newspaper, on the one hand, and the Olympic athletes and officials on the other. For those readers opposed to Australia's participation at the Olympics - photographs depicting scenes such as the happy and smiling A.O.F. executives could serve to reinforce the government's assertion that the Olympic movement is naive to the potential political implications of participating in the Moscow Games.

In addition to the photographic material there was also extensive use made, by all the newspapers, of cartoons. During the survey period, a total of 11 cartoons were featured in the four newspapers and a total of 27 cartoons directly related to the Olympic boycott issue were published. *The Age* published cartoons by Tandberg, Tanner, Luenig, Ohlsson and Petty, *The Sun* by Jeff, *The Herald* by Collette, Weg, George and Ohlsson and *The Australian* by Pickering.

Although it is often difficult to accurately label some cartoons with a clear opinion focus (because they frequently represent more than one meaning to the reader), an attempt has been made to classify them along this format. *The Age* demonstrated a balanced approach to its cartoon content by devoting most of its material (77.3%) to neutrally focused content and only minimal space to negatively (15%) and positively (7.7%) focused content. Similarly, *The Herald* published a majority (59.2%) of neutrally focused cartoons although the remaining (40.7%) were negatively focused.

Both *The Sun* and *The Australian* published only negatively focused cartoons. Cartoons were generally positioned on prominent pages within the newspapers such as the front page, editorial page or the page including the letters to the editor section. Since cartoons often imply more than one meaning, it is difficult to assess many of them as being of either a positive or negative opinion focus.

For example, one cartoon depicting Mr. Brezhnev vaulting over a barrier of Olympic rings in Moscow symbolises the failure of Mr. Carter in achieving widespread western support for his government's call to boycott the Moscow Games. On the one hand, the cartoon symbolises the Soviet's success in maintaining support from traditional U.S. allies, such as Britain and Australia. In this way, the cartoon could be interpreted as symbolising defeat for Mr. Carter and the U.S. government's plan to destabilise the Moscow Games and victory for the athletes and officials who opposed the Olympic boycott?

However, on the other hand, the cartoon also symbolises the extent to which the Olympic movement had become yet another political tool at the disposal of key politicians. In this way, the cartoon could be interpreted as symbolising the failure of the U.S. government's attempt to disrupt Soviet plans of utilising the Olympics to legitimize their own political ideology. Depending upon

the interpretation of the reader, this cartoon could be classified as being either positively or negatively focused. Therefore, like many of the cartoons surveyed, it was classified as being neutrally focused.

The cartoons of Tandberg were more direct in their approach to the various aspects of the Olympic boycott issue. On April 28th, *The Age* published a cartoon (Figure 2) depicting two public servants discussing the distinction between politics and sport.¹⁷ The message of the cartoon is aimed at highlighting the hypocritical position of the Fraser government in denouncing the nature of Soviet atrocities in Afghanistan, whilst having previously ignored similar actions by the Indonesians in East Timor during 1975. For this reason, the cartoon was classified as being positively focused or in favour of Australian athletes being allowed to participate in the Moscow Games.

Another cartoon published in *The Age* on April 25th (Figure 3) demonstrates a far more cynical and anti-Soviet reaction to the developing controversy.¹⁸ In this cartoon, the hammer and sickle of the Soviet Union's flag are depicted as weapons in the brutal repression of the Afghan people. Although this cartoon makes no direct reference to the Olympic boycott issue, it does question the occupation, by the Soviets, of Afghanistan. Cartoons such as these were instrumental in cultivating anti-Soviet feelings and therefore closely related to the Olympic boycott issue. Although readers may not have directly associated this cartoon with the Olympic boycott issue, it nevertheless served to reinforce the attitude that the Soviet Union was guilty of an unforgivable act of aggression against Afghanistan. For this reason, the cartoon was classified as being negatively focused or supportive of an Olympic boycott.

In a similar manner, cartoons in *The Herald* demonstrated a combination of negatively focused and neutrally focused material. For example, the cartoon published in *The Herald* on April 16th by "Weg" (Figure 4) illustrates the frustrating and hopeless position of the Australian athletes as they faced the prospect of missing out on the Moscow Olympics owing to the political pressure being enforced on the A.O.F. Since this cartoon is not directly focused on the question of participation in the Moscow Games but rather reflects the ironic position of the athletes, it was classified as being neutrally focused.

Cartoon material in *The Sun* was rather limited during the period of the survey yielding only four negatively focused cartoons, all by the cartoonist "Jeff". For example, the cartoon by "Jeff", published in *The Sun* on April 15th (Figure 5) depicts the leader of the Australian Labor Party, Mr. Bill Hayden, leading his party along the path to an Olympic boycott. The caption, "Oh well - the important thing is not the winning, but taking part", refers to suggestions that the A.L.P. should join with the government in supporting a boycott of the Moscow Games. However, it is interesting to note that the A.L.P. did not side with the government over this issue but rather actively opposed it by defending the interests of the athletes before and during the Moscow Games.

Finally, all cartoons in *The Australian* concerning the boycott issue were by Pickering and classified as being negatively focused. As Deane has pointed out, all of Pickering's cartoons "seem to have been aimed at engendering some of the more stronger anti-Soviet, xenophobic reactions."¹⁹ Most cartoons depicted the Soviet leaders as cold and militant figures concerned only with using the Olympics to legitimize their political system.

V

In the western world, it is often suggested that the press should both reflect and guide public opinion, as well as remain economically viable. In order to reflect and guide public opinion a number of subjective, conscious and unconscious decisions are made which thereby render an article less than objective. In this sense, the press is, by its very nature selective and must remain so in order to function as a worthwhile medium of stimulation.

Therefore, selectivity exists in all Australian newspapers in various forms and to varying degrees. When factors are considered such as the class background of journalists, their personal values and interests, the commercial realities of running a newspaper, the political inclinations of the proprietors, and the incredible amount of 'newsworthy' material constantly available for printing,

it is only reasonable to presume that a certain degree of Selectivity is inevitable. Selection may give rise to bias, but to criticise the press purely on the basis that it does not print all the news is both impractical and pointless.

The press has a number of functions to perform. Some of these major functions were identified by the 1949 British Royal Commission on the press and include the following: (i) to report current events and interpret them to readers; (ii) to comment on matters of public interest; (iii) to inform, educate and entertain; (iv) to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas; (v) to express its own opinion; and (vi) to publish news of interest to its readers. Although it is extremely idealistic to expect newspapers to pursue all of these objectives with equal intensity, it is clear that the press does have certain social responsibilities. This means that the press cannot be considered solely as an industry, but rather as a forum for information. Since the press in Australia is generally free from governmental intervention, it is able to set its own standards of fairness and balance. However, in order to maintain its freedom, the press in Australia has an obligation to acknowledge and exercise certain social responsibilities.

As Peterson has pointed out, "freedom carries concomitant obligations and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under our government, is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communications in contemporary society."²⁰ Hence, in a democratic society all people have a right "to expect from their newspaper a comprehensive account of the day's events in a context that gives them meaning."²³ It is the responsibility of the newspapers to arouse public interest in current events and provide information about what they should be aware of and what they have a right to know. Even if the majority of people do not look to the press for such information, the rights of the minority should not be denied. Everyone should have access to balanced and comprehensive news.

Yet from the results and analysis of the seven week content analysis, it would appear that the direction of bias operating in the four newspapers surveyed was, in the main, negatively focused or in support of an Australian boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games. Only *The Age* seems to have made a conscious attempt to balance the

opinion focus of information, although even it demonstrated some complex techniques, such as the manipulation of the position and prominence of news items within the paper. This conclusion supports Edgar and Smith's judgement that these papers are capable of quite clear bias.

Although it is extremely unlikely to expect the press on the whole to remain totally objective in the presentation of news, it is clear that it does have certain social responsibilities to society. In a system where the press enjoys, broadly speaking, freedom from governmental restraint, it has an obligation to arouse public interest in current events and provide balanced and comprehensive news. From these results, it would appear that the newspapers surveyed largely neglected their social responsibility to the readers.

In order to investigate some of the factors contributing to this trend, it is interesting to consider the general consensus of public opinion as reflected by some of the early opinion polls. The first polls were published in February by *The Herald* and *The National Times* on the two questions "Should Australia boycott the Moscow Games?" and "should Australia continue to trade with the Soviet Union?"²² Both these polls indicated clearly that the majority surveyed were not necessarily convinced that Australia should boycott the Moscow Games and that the federal government had, as *The National Times* suggested "seriously miscalculated by committing itself to the boycott."²³ Given such an adverse political climate, it is difficult to understand why the federal government pursued the Olympic boycott issue so actively, and why the press seems to have supported their goal so faithfully.

First, it seems that the Fraser government's reaction to the U.S. call for a boycott was spiced with the kind of "Red under the bed" rhetoric reminiscent of the 1950s and 60s. This approach enabled the government to revalidate the old thesis that "once again Australia is in danger, this time from a Soviet drive through South-East Asia and...the U.S. must be encouraged to resist."²⁴ Second, by focusing attention on the Olympic boycott, the Fraser government was able to divert attention away from a boycott of Australian primary products to the Soviet Union. By 1980, trade with the Soviet Union ran forty to one in favour of Australia. Wheat contracts

alone were valued at 314 million dollars, hence as *The National Times* reported on February 17th, "Fraser realises that 40 percent of our export income comes from the rural industries. An embargo on trade with the Soviets would have a very grave effect on the economy."²⁵ Third, like Mr. Garter in the U.S., Mr. Fraser was also preparing for an election at the end of the year. Although public support for a boycott was 'never as strong as it was in the U.S., it could be argued that, in the light of the then recent economic slump, the government needed to re-establish its credibility amongst its traditional supporters by committing itself to the condemnation of Soviet imperialism in Afghanistan. This point was clearly highlighted by *The Herald's* cartoonist "Weg" in his Valentine message to the Olympic athletes (Figure 6). Finally, it is perhaps symbolic to note that, although the general effect of the consistently negative balance of press bias during the survey period (as reflected in the public opinion polls) was to initially increase support for the Olympic boycott, it would appear that, by late June, public support had begun to fade.

In fact, *The Age* poll of April 18th indicated that 35% of the public were in favour of a boycott whereas by June 5th the same poll indicated that this support had risen to 59 percent. However, the final poll published by *The Herald* on June 20th, using the Gallup method, indicated that public support for the Olympic boycott had begun to wane. Therefore, it would appear that the public had reached a threshold or saturation point on the issue and that further pressure from the Government and the media to continue their campaign of persuading the A.O.F. to reverse its decision to compete was proving to be counter productive.

A cartoon by "Weg" (Figure 7) published in *The Herald* alongside details of the June 20th Gallup poll illustrates this feeling of saturation that many readers were experiencing as the issue dragged into the latter half of 1980. The three captions presented in the cartoon symbolised the long and ardent battle fought between the A.O.F. and the government and hinted that "Australia's already won one event... The Marathon!"



Figure 1: The Age, 24/5/80



Figure 2: Tandberg, The Age, 18/4/80



Figure 3: Tandberg, The Age, 25/4/80

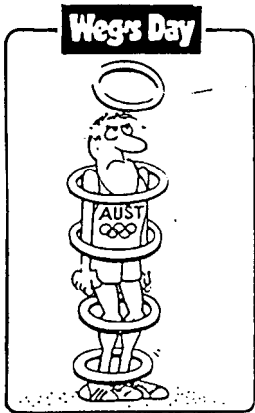


Figure 4: Weg : The Herald,
16/4/80



Figure 5: Jeff , The Sun, 15/4/80



Figure 6: "Weg", The Herald,
14/2/80



Figure 7: Weg , The Herald,
20/6/80

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