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SPORTS PAGE:

**Newswork Routines and the Social Construction of Sports News
in the Daily Press**

by

Mark Lowes, B.A. (Hons.)

**A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts

School of Canadian Studies

**Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario**

January 4, 1995

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Construction of Sports News in the Daily Press"

submitted by Mark Lowes, Hons. B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The sports pages of metropolitan daily newspapers are saturated with commercial spectator sports news. Utilizing data from fieldwork in the sports department of a large Canadian metropolitan daily, this study argues the commercial sports bias is a product of newswriters' beliefs about what sports news appeals to contemporary news consumers, and their methods for uncovering sports news. Newswriters depend on routine sources for the bulk of their raw news material. Almost invariably these sources are commercial sports organizations and social actors from the commercial sports world. This is a practical necessity, enabling newswriters to cope with the pressures of their work. Consequently, newswriting routines employed in the daily manufacture of sports news tend to read non-commercial sports out of the news. Sports news in the daily press is thus routinely defined by newswriters as news about commercial spectator sports.

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I am indebted to the sports newswriters who gave so much of their precious little time, and tolerated my seemingly endless presence in their newsroom. This study would not have been possible without them.

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And most important is my family. To Mom and Dad, thanks for all those years spent enduring cold hockey arenas at 6:00 in the morning, and long, rainy fall afternoons in football stadiums. I'm so glad you were there for me. To Rhonda, Jason and Tara who suffered an annoying big brother, you're the best. And Jim, I couldn't have done it without you, man.

**To someone special, someone who changed my life.
A special place in my heart is forever yours.**

"Oh, my Love's a red, red rose...."

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Background

This is a study of the social construction of sports news. It attempts to explain why the sports pages of Canadian metropolitan daily newspapers are saturated with news of activities in the commercial sports world, while non-commercial sports receive only a modicum of coverage at best. Of primary concern is the work routines sports reporters employ in the daily manufacture of sports news — specifically, how these practices for uncovering and reporting sports news contribute to the commercial sports bias in the metropolitan daily press.

The mass media (television, radio, daily newspapers) are windows onto the world through which we learn about events beyond our immediate experience. The media select, order, organize and highlight the day's events in a way that tells us what is important, what deserves our attention. The mass media is thus a powerful ideological institution that fixes the agenda of public discourse. It does not tell us what to think, but rather what to think about:

The audience is not so malleable as merely to follow in the warp advocated on the editorial pages of the newspapers or in the commentaries of the networks. But its members do take cues about the nature of the world about them from the media. And those cues influence what they do (*Royal Commission on Newspapers* 1981d: 15).

In the same vein, Hackett (1988: 83) argues that,

More than most industries, mass media combine economic importance with ideological potency. Media produce not only profits, but also meanings.

These meanings are imbedded in news, the end product of newswork.

Newswork, the processes by which news is manufactured, is of principal concern to this study. News organizations rely on newswriters, acting as "gatekeepers" (White 1950), to make copious decisions about what is reported and how it is treated (Pollard 1989). Thus, an awareness of how news is manufactured by newswriters is indispensable for understanding the socio-cultural impact of news on Canadian society.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to develop an understanding of how newswork routines shape the content of the sports section of a Canadian metropolitan daily newspaper. Specifically, the goal is to enhance our understanding of sports newswork, concentrating on the routines reporters follow to manufacture sports news every day. The study explores the relationship between sports reporters and their sources, and how this relationship produces sports news in the daily press that focuses on commercial spectator sports at the expense of non-commercial sports.

The sports pages of metropolitan dailies have a pronounced commercial sports bias. This is underscored by the findings of content analyses of the sports pages of North American newspapers, which reveal that sports news is saturated with coverage of commercial sports, such as the National Hockey League, the Canadian Football League, professional golf and Major League Baseball (Rintala and Birrell 1984; Lever and Wheeler 1984; Bryant 1980; Scanlon 1970). And, as

Gelinas and Theberge (1986) point out there is limited coverage of non-commercial sports activity in daily metropolitan newspapers. To enhance understanding of why this is so, I argue that newswork routines employed for generating sports news should be the focus of critical attention.

Despite its socio-cultural importance, little systematic research on the social construction of sports news in the press has been carried out. McFarlane's (1955) pioneering study of sports promotion in a metropolitan Canadian city and Smith's (1976) study of Edmonton sports journalists only implicitly deal with this. Theberge and Cronk (1986) constitutes the only study that directly examines newswork routines and their effect on the coverage of sports in the daily press. There is, to say the least, a paucity of critical study of the social construction of sports news, which this study sets out to address.

This study does not argue that the content of sports news in the daily press is entirely determined by newswork routines. Obviously, there are competing and complementary explanations. Among the explanations for the overrepresentation of commercial spectator sports in the mass media, perhaps the most compelling is that market forces, in particular the *audience commodity*, are responsible for shaping the content of sports news in the mass media.

Audience commodity refers to the market relation whereby media audiences are assigned commercial value by media organizations and sold, as a commodity, to advertisers (Sparks 1992; Jhally 1990, 1984, 1982). The audience commodity plays a central role in the market economy of exchange values in media industries, and constitutes the principal source of most media revenue (Bagdikian 1992; Sparks 1992; Gitlin 1985). From an industry standpoint, the goal is to consistently produce a high-value audience commodity at a low cost to "sell" to advertisers in order to maximize revenue and profits.

Businesses purchase advertising space with the intent of "speaking" to a highly concentrated homogeneous audience that is most likely to be interested in buying whatever it is they're advertising. This is what Bagdikian (1992:109) terms the "iron rule" of advertising-supported media: it is less important that people buy your publication than they be "the right kind" of people. Commercial sports deliver the high-value audience commodity media organizations so desire — an identifiable and highly concentrated male demographic between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine years (Sparks 1992; Jhally 1990, 1984, 1982; Beamish 1984; Parente 1977). It is the ability of a news organization to deliver this highly specific and concentrated demographic that determines whether a business will purchase advertising space. To this end, advertising-supported media extensively and regularly cover those sports they can count on to attract the "right audience"; that is, they provide almost exclusive coverage of commercial spectator sports to "deliver the male" to advertisers (Sparks 1992).

To be sure, the market forces argument is important. The notion that the relationship between sports and their coverage in daily newspapers can best be understood with reference to the sale of audiences to advertisers is certainly a valuable notion. The market forces explanation demonstrates the importance economic rationality plays in limiting the range of sports coverage in the daily press. At the same time however I find this argument limiting because it relies too heavily on economic reductionism to account for the over-representation of commercial sports in the sports sections of the daily press. It does not take into consideration how newswork routines contribute to this commercial sports bias. While the market forces argument contributes to this study, it cannot stand alone as an explanation for the commercial sports bias in metropolitan daily newspapers.

The perspective taken in this study does complement the market forces theory. Again, the central thesis of this study is that newswork routines are a major determinant of the commercial sports bias in daily newspaper sports coverage. If we wish to understand why it is that some sports receive a high amount of coverage and others virtually none, then we must examine how news is manufactured by newswriters. Thus, this study takes as its point of departure an overview of the approaches that have been taken to the study of news and newswork in metropolitan dailies.

The earliest approaches to the study of news regarded newswork as an information processing system, the most important result of which was the selection of events that were reported as news (Fishman 1980: 13). Studies of newswriters as "gatekeepers" attempted to uncover variables that revealed how editors selected written news copy for publication (Geiber 1956; White 1950). This approach was premised on the notion that the travelling of a news item through certain communication channels was dependent on the fact that certain points within the channel functioned as "gates." These gates were governed by individuals acting as "gatekeepers," and it was they who decided what news stories were "in" or "out" (White 1950: 383).

White (1950) provided the foundation for this line of research. He addressed the question of why a particular gatekeeper, a news wire editor for a metropolitan U.S. newspaper, selected or rejected the news stories filed by three major news associations. He studied the editor's overt reasons for rejecting nine-tenths of the stories that came in on the news wires in his search for the one-tenth for which there was space to publish. In making these decisions, White (1950)

found the wire editor's selection of news stories for publication to be highly subjective. Variables influencing item selection were largely value-judgments based on the gatekeeper's own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations of what was newsworthy. For example, stories were rejected because the wire editor considered them as being "too Red," or "B.S." or "Propaganda" — all value judgments (White 1950: 386). Furthermore, in almost every case where the wire editor had some choice between competing press association stories, he preferred the "conservative" news items (White 1950: 389).¹

In a similar vein, Geiber (1956) focused on the work of a group of sixteen telegraph editors to determine why some news stories were published and others were rejected. Geiber (1956) argued the job of telegraph editor may be considered to be a "communication role." Ideally, the role requires the telegraph editor to select wire items "appropriate to the reader's 'needs' and use skill and judgment in transmitting them to the reader" (Geiber 1956: 423). However, the subjects he studied did not carry out this ideal role.

On the majority of the wire desks studied, the demand for and the employment of rigorous and careful reading and editing of wire stories was "at low ebb." For example, the editing of wire stories — what Geiber (1956: 428) describes as "the effort to maximize the meaning of news" — was all but absent. Instead, editors were dependent on the press association to ensure the accuracy of the wire stories they provided. Editing really consisted of adjusting stories for length, with most wire editors indicating they "butchered" stories by removing paragraphs from the bottom of the wire stories (Geiber 1956: 428). Operating

¹ White (1950: 389) uses the term "conservative" not only in terms of its political sense, but also in terms of the style of writing.

under time pressures was almost universally the explanation given for this absence of editing.

Concerned with the immediate need to get stories from the wires into the paper under tight deadlines, the editors studied did little more than the most meager editing of wire copy; instead they relied on the press association to perform this function. Geiber (1956) concluded that quick 'pass or reject' decisions determined the selection of wire stories for publication.

Whereas White (1950) characterized the wire editor as a key selector of news, Geiber (1956: 432) suggests the contrary, painting a picture of wire editors as "passive" and "caught in a strait jacket of mechanical details." Rather than exercising skill and judgment in selecting and editing wire stories, the editors assumed a passive role, mechanically selecting stories from the wires. The skills of telegraph editing had disintegrated into "wire-copy fixing" (Geiber 1956: 432). The selection of wire stories for publication was largely controlled by time and space constraints, leading Geiber (1956) to conclude wire editors were more concerned with the temporal orientation of a publishing cycle, that is, filling space in each edition of the newspaper on time.

Early newswork studies also examined reporters as "organizational men," whose professional ideal of objectivity was subverted by organizational forces that caused reporters to slant their stories and omit information. Rosten (1937), Breed (1955) and Stark (1962) in particular laid the foundation for this line of research.

Breed (1955) was concerned with identifying the structural sources of bias newspapers exhibited in their coverage. He assumed that all newspaper organizations had a policy that defined how news was slanted. Policy focused on a newspaper's covert stance towards business, labour and politics. Slanting did not imply prevarication. It was achieved and maintained through selective omission or

preferential placement of news stories. Featuring a pro-policy item on page one and burying an anti-policy item on page 97 reveals the relative importance of each for the newspaper and, ultimately, its readers (Pollard 1989: 55). Breed (1955) concluded that policy was maintained even though it sometimes contravened journalistic norms. Newswriters, however, often personally disagreed with it and publishers, senior editors and editors could not openly demand compliance.

Stark (1962) used Breed's findings (1955) as a blueprint for his study of the newsroom of a family newspaper in a large California city. Stark (1962) found that policy did exist at this newspaper and it was set and enforced by three male members of the family that owned the paper. Policy conformity was the norm, with violations of policy punished (firings and demotions were frequent sanctions).

Following Breed (1955) and Stark (1962), Matejko (1970) focused on the socio-psychological aspects of the problem of policy. He studied four Polish newspapers, analyzing how newsrooms continued to operate even when faced with an enormous disparity between professional and organizational objectives. On the one hand, newswriters in this study harboured strong professional ambitions, looking upon journalism as

a job calling for boldness, a job in which they should put forward and submit to public discussion views of their own which would lead to wide controversy, and as would inspire other people and compel them to revise their own stereotyped ways of thinking and acting (Matejko 1970: 169).

On the other hand, organizational objectives were geared towards fulfilling tasks of particular importance to the authorities (the Polish state), such as showing certain problems in a certain light (Matejko 1970).

The Polish state determined much of newspaper content and item treatment (Matejko 1970). Editors, and especially the editor-in-chief, were charged with the responsibility of passing on the authorities' suggestions for coverage, and of inducing the staff to adhere to the "Party line" postulated by the authorities (Matejko 1970). Policy adherence was related to the motivational level of newswriters and motivation to professional autonomy: the greater the autonomy, the greater the motivation and the more policy acceptance (Pollard 1989: 62). Thus, policy handed down to the organization by the state largely determined the final news product reaching the public.

Warner (1971) replicated Breed's study (1955) among newswriters in the three major American television network newsrooms (ABC, NBC, CBS). He found that television newsrooms, like newspapers, have a policy to select what events are broadcast and how they are emphasized (Warner 1971: 284). In network news, policy emanates from "the Organization," rather than the personal biases of owners (Warner 1971: 285), as was the case with Breed (1955). The highly diffuse nature of television network ownership makes it unlikely that any owner, ownership group or executive group could bias the news operation for any length of time.

Whereas the press usually has a fairly explicit editorial inclination (Breed 1955), policy at television news organizations is more subtle since they are constrained by the "balanced news" doctrine; that is, an obligation to present both sides of an issue. While some "views" are permitted in television reporting (Warner 1971: 284), television newswriters are under greater pressure to conform to policy than are their counterparts in the press (Warner 1971). The autonomy of network television newsrooms combined with time and technological

concerns make policy adherence necessary, lest the whole news process grind to a halt (Pollard 1989: 63).

In sum, the primary research concern of the literature reviewed was confined to uncovering how news organizations and individual gatekeepers selected what news items — as pre-existing entities — pass into print (Fishman 1980: 13). And these studies conceived of the news production process only as a news selection process. The problem with this approach is that it neglected how reporters actually constructed the news stories being selected for publication, and how they formulated what they saw and heard on a news beat. News events were considered as existing in and of themselves. For example, the copy editors studied by Geiber (1956:430) defined news simply as "what comes in" on the wires. News was something which existed "out there" and hence could be effectively reported by competent, unrestrained news professionals (Molotch and Lester 1975).

The reason for this conception of news as an objective reality in and of itself lies in the "news as mirror" metaphor (Tuchman 1978; Epstein 1973). From this perspective, news does no more than mirror or distort reality, and reality consists of facts and events that exist "out there" independently of how newswriters think of them and treat them. If news is assumed to be analogous to a mirror, reflecting all that appears before it, questions concerning the role of newswriter routines in uncovering and writing news stories in the first place become irrelevant (Epstein 1973: 14). Thus, the impact of newswriter routines on what is reported in the press as news are not accounted for in the earlier studies of newswriting.

Breaking with this tradition, recent media research recognizes that the social world is not already constructed as a reality, merely waiting to be reported

impartially and objectively by newswriters. Instead, newsmaking is conceived of as the act of *constructing reality* (Ericson, *et al* 1991, 1989, 1987; Altheide 1985; Fishman 1980; Tuchman 1978; Molotch and Lester 1975; Sigal 1973). Newswriting is "the art of structuring reality, rather than recording it" (Smith 1978: 168). Reporters do not simply report events, "but participate in them and act as protagonists" (Ericson *et al* 1991: 16). In fact,

The media institution affords reporters considerable power as *selectors* of which people can speak in public conversations, as *formulators* of how these people are presented, and as *authors* of knowledge (Ericson *et al* 1991: 16).

As such, reporters influence and determine which sports organizations will be given coverage, the length of a news item, and its slant. Reporters control the more subtle aspects of source access and coverage; for instance, the line of questioning employed in interviewing a player and general manager during a contract dispute. From this perspective, media researchers have argued that the world we know through the mass media is a direct result of the work routines newswriters employ to manufacture news. Thus, what we know about the sports world through the mass media is a product of newswriting processes, the decisions made by sports newswriters as to what events to cover, who to talk to, and how to report them.

It is this last point that is of central concern to this study: how do newswriters manufacture sports news? To answer this, I focus on the routines sports newswriters follow in sifting through and selecting from among the myriad events occurring daily in the sports world those to be reported and analyzed in the sports pages. Put differently, sports news is the result of the methods newswriters employ to make sense of "a buzzing, blooming world of particulars"

(Fishman 1980: 13). Were different methods used to uncover it, different forms of news would result and people would know the sports world outside of their direct experience in a much different way.

Plan of the Study

Chapter 2 develops a model of newswork. This is based on a selective review of newswork literature and the sociology of sports literature. Chapter 3 is an overview of the method employed for this study.

The next two chapters, 4 and 5, marshal together almost seventy pages of empirical evidence. Taken together, they describe how sports news is constructed every day by sports newsworkers at the *Examiner*.² Chapter 4 delves into the pressures and constraints under which sports news is manufactured at a metropolitan daily newspaper. What we find is that commercial sports organizations facilitate sports newswork, making it easier for sports reporters especially to do their jobs. They do this to secure regular and extensive coverage of their activities in the *Examiner's* sports section. Chapter 5 examines how commercial sports organizations go about facilitating sports newswork. The relationships that develop between sports reporters and their routine sources in this context are also considered. Finally, in the sixth chapter, I evaluate the sports newswork model in light of the empirical evidence.

² To protect anonymity, all individuals and organizations (except where otherwise noted) have been given pseudonyms.

CHAPTER 2

Developing a Model: newswork and the social construction of sports news

It is senseless to talk of an absolute or objective reality without connecting with the procedures through which such a reality could be established as real by us.

— Hegel (in Sigal 1973: xv)

This chapter develops an analytical model of sports newswork routines through a selective review of newswork literature and sociology of sport literature. The underlying theme, as advanced by recent newswork research, is that "news" is a social construction; it is not a mirror of society, but the product of routine newswork activities that include the selection of events to cover, how they are treated, placement in the paper, and so on. The primary constructors of the reality presented to the news consumer are reporters, that is, non-management newspaper employees responsible for newsgathering and writing. The concern of this study is with the work routines of sports reporters and editors.

Before I can begin to construct the model, however, it is necessary to consider how metropolitan daily newspapers operate as commercial enterprises. Specifically, the goal of the first part of this chapter is to develop an understanding of how market forces, in particular the *audience commodity*, shape the content of sports news in the daily press to reflect a bias towards perceived male tastes.

By audience commodity, I refer to the market relation whereby media audiences are assigned commercial values by media organizations and sold, as a commodity, to advertisers (Sparks 1992). The audience commodity 'plays a central role in the market economy of exchange values in the media industry and constitutes the principal means by which most media organizations are revenue producing' (Sparks 1992; cf. Jhally 1982, 1984; Gitlin 1985). From the industry standpoint, the main goal is to consistently produce a high-value audience commodity at a low cost to "sell" to advertisers in order to maximize revenue and profits (Jhally 1990, 1984; Gruneau 1989; Gitlin 1985). For sports, this means cultivating a male-dominated audience, that is, the audience sports advertisers want to reach.

A discussion of the audience commodity in its proper historical context necessitates a brief exploration of the emergence of the advertising-supported media industry in Canada. Rutherford (1978: 49) argues that perhaps the most outstanding event in the emergence of industrial Canada was the "renaissance of the popular press." There was nearly a threefold increase in the number of newspapers published between 1874 and 1900, due in large part to the emergence of self-proclaimed "people's journals," such as *La Presse* (1884) in Montreal; *The Telegram* (1874), *The News* (1881), and *The Star* (1892) in Toronto; the *Ottawa Journal* (1885); and the *Herald* (1889) in Hamilton (Rutherford 1978: 49; Gruneau and Whitson 1993: 81).

The people's journals, in contrast to expensive 'highbrow' papers, typically sought to shake free of traditional political partisan ties and to adopt a more populist stance, producing newspapers geared towards the needs, interests and reading-level of the new urban masses. They began operating increasingly as profit-driven businesses committed to reaching as many readers as possible. According to Rutherford (1978: 49),

By and large, the people's journals were one-cent evening dailies which combined sensational practices, maverick politics, and much local news to win the support of the less sophisticated and less prosperous readers in Canada's cities.

Following the examples set by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst in the United States, the most successful of the new popular dailies experimented with new layouts, increased use of pictures and photographs, dramatic headlines, and sensational stories to attract readers previously excluded by the highbrow and elitist Victorian press (Rutherford 1978; Jhally 1984). They expanded coverage of sports and entertainment, added more cartoons and comics, introduced new columns and whole sections for women; in other words, "something for everyone in the whole family" (Gruneau and Whitson 1993: 82).

The growing representation of popular interests and pleasures in the daily press had particular importance with respect to the new significance of *advertising* in Canadian culture. Publishers were gradually moving beyond their initial use of advertising simply to supplement revenues derived from circulation (Rutherford 1978; Jhally 1984; Gruneau and Whitson 1993). More and more they were beginning to regard their publications not so much as products to be sold to readers,

but more as vehicles that organized audiences into clearly identifiable target groups that could be sold to advertisers; the audiences themselves became the 'products' generated by the [emerging] media industry" (Leiss *et al* 1990: 102).

Thus, the *quality* of readers became more important than the *quantity* of readers. Newspapers wanted to attract those readers with disposable incomes who could be swayed to purchase an advertiser's wares; consequently, the core market for popular daily newspapers became male wage earners and businessmen.

To help advertisers reach male readers, publishers catered to perceived male tastes in their coverage of politics, business and labour reporting, and, above all, sports (Gruneau and Whitson 1993; Vipond 1992; Stevens 1987; Rutherford 1978). At *La Presse* in Montreal, for instance, the proportion of total news space devoted to political opinions *fell* from about 14 percent to less than 4 percent between 1885 and 1914, while space devoted to sports and leisure *rose* from 5 percent to over 15 percent (Vipond 1992: 13). Likewise, in the United States the sports pages had grown into the sports section by the late 1920's, containing much of the same information found in today's newspapers (Coakley 1986: 95). Lever and Wheeler's (1984) study of the *Chicago Tribune* found that sports coverage became an increasingly significant part of the paper between 1900-1975. Sports coverage made up 9% of the total newsprint in 1900 and 17% in 1975. Even more significant was their finding that the ratio of sports coverage to general news coverage grew from 14% in 1900 to slightly over 50% in 1975.

By the end of the nineteenth century most major Canadian dailies had substantially increased their sports coverage and created separate sports departments, which divided their attention between local and international, amateur and professional sports (Rutherford (1978: 60). Yet, despite this

specialization, sports reporting remained strikingly similar to other forms of "specialty reporting," and catered to male interests. For example, Rutherford (1978: 60-61) notes important similarity between the sports coverage of the era and the press's increasingly specialized coverage of business:

The two departments boosted their separate pursuits — they thrilled with a sense of the drama and excitement and significance of the little doings of these worlds, never troubling to criticize or question.

In each case, journalists celebrated the ideals of manliness and competition; sports writers glorified the ritualized drama and excitement of masculine physical contests, and business writers exalted the cult of competition in the free market (Gruneau and Whitson 1993: 83).

Sports coverage was good not only for building circulation, but also for opening up connections for new sources of advertising revenues from businesses interested in reaching male consumers including beer, alcohol, and tobacco-producers in addition to sporting goods companies, sports promoters, rail and tram companies, and hotel operators (Gruneau 1983; Gruneau and Whitson 1993: 83). In a nutshell, daily newspapers sold advertisers access to their sports section readership; this is how dailies generated the bulk of their revenue. And it is in this context that daily newspapers came to be advertising-supported commercial enterprises.

Essentially, what I have outlined is the "iron rule" of advertising-supported media: "It is less important that people buy your publication than they be the 'right kind of people'" (Bagdikian 1992: 109). The "right kind" of media sports consumers are males eighteen to forty-nine years of age (Sparks 1992; Johnson

1988; Jhally, 1982; Parente 1977; McPherson 1975). It is a newspaper's ability to deliver this highly specific and concentrated male demographic that determines whether an advertiser will purchase its advertising space. And the prevailing philosophy in the sports news industry is that the best way to attract male readers is with extensive coverage of commercial spectator sports (Theberge and Cronk 1986; Rintala and Birrell 1984; Beamish 1984). Wenner (1989: 36) notes,

For the major metropolitan daily, the sports section is largely a way for advertisers to reach men in an atmosphere they enjoy. A paper with a reputation for strong sports coverage will have little trouble selling advertising space to advertisers with an eye on men.

In effect, metropolitan dailies cater to perceived male tastes — providing extensive coverage of commercial spectator sports — in order to generate a commercially appealing audience commodity. The sports pages of metropolitan dailies are thus saturated with commercial sports news. This is underscored by the findings of a number of content analyses (Gelinias and Theberge 1986; Rintala and Birrell 1984; Lever and Wheeler 1984; Bryant 1980; Scanlon 1970). Commercial sports are 'cash cows,' and newspaper organizations depend on them to "deliver the male" (Sparks 1992).

With this discussion of the audience commodity in mind, I now return to the task set at the outset of the chapter: to construct a testable model of sports newswork routines at metropolitan dailies. The paucity of literature examining sports newswork routines at metropolitan dailies necessitates the construction of the model primarily from the general newswork literature. The sociology of sports literature is then selectively reviewed to uncover implicit references to the model. Ultimately, these two streams of literature are brought together to form the model of sports newswork routines.

Newswork does not occur in a vacuum. It is largely controlled by pressures and constraints originating from two primary sources. First, the *newspaper organization*, which imposes temporal and technological constraints on newswork, such as writing deadlines. Second, *external economic forces* that act on the newspaper organization; for example, decreasing advertising revenues force newspapers to reduce their reporting staffs. Newswriters have developed institutionalized routines to cope with the confluence of these pressures.

For employees of news organizations there is a normative requirement for reporters to generate news items toward the daily production of the newspaper. Editors need news items to fill the "news hole" every day.³ Newswriters are expected to produce "a certain quantity of what is called 'news' every 24 hours" (Breed 1955: 331). "Nothing happened" is insufficient grounds for writing no stories (Fishman 1980: 35); reporters orient their newsgathering and story writing practices with this principle in mind. Indeed, the obligation to generate news stories every day is so strong that even if reporters and editors agree that "nothing was happening" on a news beat, reporters are still responsible for writing something.

Beat reporting is based on the assignment of a reporter to a particular subject in order to cover it regularly. Politics, crime, business, and sports, for example, are all considered worthy of a news beat. In comparison to *general assignment* reporting, where reporters are typically assigned news items to research and write by their editors and therefore have limited autonomy (Casey 1994; Desbarats 1992), beat reporters are rarely assigned stories. They are instead

³ "News hole" refers to the blank space in a newspaper devoted to news items rather than advertising.

expected to generate news from their beat on their own initiative, so they routinely spend more time stationed at their beat locations than in the newsroom.

Removed from direct editorial supervision, the beat reporter assumes responsibility for deciding what to cover and how to cover it (Fishman 1980: 27; Sigal 1973). According to Finnegan (1994), as an editor,

I don't tell Smith what to write. It's his beat, he knows what's going on better than I do. I may give him an idea, you know, 'Hey, I hear such-and-such is going on, think there's a story there?'.... But I want to know what he's writing about.

The decision of what to cover and how, is up to the beat reporter; s/he is only required to keep the editor informed of what stories they are working on.

While newswriters are expected to generate a regular flow of news stories culled from their beat on a daily basis, the number of items they must write varies considerably:

Some days they write one story, others five or six. But no, there's no set quota carved in stone; I don't tell MacKinnon that every Tuesday he's gotta give me four stories on whatever. It depends on how much is happening [on the newswriter's beat] and how much space I've gotta fill" (Finnegan 1994).⁴

The amount of news space reporters are expected to fill is worked out in a conference or through telephone calls with their editors each day (Finnegan 1994; Sigal 1973).

Not only are newswriters under pressure to generate a variable quantity of items each day, but they are to do so under relentless deadlines seemingly beyond

⁴ Fishman (1980: 34) found that, on average, newswriters turned out anywhere from two to six items in a day.

their control. These deadlines are imposed on newswriters by their newspaper organization, and seem to be largely influenced by technology. At the *Examiner*, for example, sports reporters are expected to submit completed news items no later than 11:00 pm; it is around this time the production process begins. Stories must be approved by editors, pages composed and several editions printed and delivered. Since each stage of production and distribution depends upon completion of an earlier stage, setting and meeting deadlines is essential (Sigal 1973: 102).

Fishman (1980: 146) and Sigal (1973: 12-13) note that the economic motive for these news deadlines is clear: if a newspaper is to maintain a sizable readership, it must have its product ready to be delivered at predictable times and places. To this end, newspaper organizations aim their deliveries at specific time slots to capitalize on prime reading periods; morning papers must be on the streets and delivered to homes in time for breakfast readers and commuters on their way to work; evening papers aim for a pre-dinnertime audience (Tuchman 1978, 1972). Organizational deadlines must be met, or else distribution and eventually circulation and profits will suffer. Newswriting can be seen to hinge on the size of the news hole that reporters must fill and the deadlines under which it must be done.

A second factor that influences newswriting is economic conditions that are external to the news organization. This has been particularly evident since late 1988, when Canada began to feel the effects of the recession (Sporn 1992). As retail businesses suffered from the recession, so did newspapers that depend on the retail trade for much of their advertising revenue; approximately thirty per cent of all advertising expenditures in Canada are placed with newspapers (Southam 1991: 36). So, with the retail industry cutting back on advertising expenditures,

newspapers have seen their primary source of revenue dwindle (Bagdikian 1992; Sporn 1992). The newspaper industry response to this economic crisis has been to, among other things, squeeze, if not slash, operating budgets to save money. Hardest hit has been labour, that is, newspaper staffs.

Southam Incorporated, for example, which controls the largest share (29 per cent) of national daily newspaper circulation in Canada (Dalgish 1992: 28), has been active in cutting staff as a cost-saving measure. In 1991, its employee population of about 16,000 was reduced by more than 800 or five per cent (Southam 1991). In 1992, Southam announced a three-year Work Force Reduction Program with a goal of reducing the ratio of labour costs to revenue by the end of 1994, representing an annual saving of \$75 million when complete; in 1993 alone, a saving of \$20 million was expected (Southam 1992: 3). Clearly, the influence of such policies on a newspaper's approach to news coverage is difficult to overestimate.

Newspapers cannot afford to have reporters at every place where news stories may break; presupposing, of course, this was humanly possible. Not only would such an endeavour require newspapers to employ staffs far beyond existing levels, but the enormous sum of money that would have to be spent dispatching reporters to cover potentially newsworthy occurrences would break the organization's financial back. Essentially, the scarcity of both human and financial resources makes economizing necessary; that is, newspaper organizations are expected to "do more with less."

Today, as a result, newspaper organizations and newswriters are faced with a serious dilemma: how to produce enough news stories every day to fill the paper, if for no other reason than to have something to wrap around the advertisements? Approximately the same amount of news must be generated every

day in the face of shrinking budgets and staffs — just because the resources used to produce the news are dwindling does not mean that the size of the news hole is also shrinking.

How do reporters cope with the pressures of producing predictable quantities of news every day while economic factors beyond their control constrain their numbers and fewer reporters are expected to produce virtually the same amount of news? More simply, how do reporters cope with the pressures and constraints imposed on them by their organization, which is itself constrained by economic forces, to produce predictable quantities of news copy every day?

The answer is that they have developed institutionalized methods to manage newswork. "Institutionalized methods" is defined as a distinctive set of patterns and rules of conduct that (i) persist in recognizably similar form across long spans of time and space; and, (ii) represent well-recognized and widely accepted ways of doing things in society (Giddens 1982: 10). In other words, today's patterns of action tend to reiterate past patterns; "repeated time after time, these actions become standard operating procedures," they "take on a life of their own" and become "the way things are done" (Sigal 1973: 101). In this way, newswork becomes routinized (Ericson, *et al* 1991, 1989, 1987; Altheide 1985; Fishman 1980; Tuchman 1972, 1978; Roshco 1975; Sigal 1973). What these newswork routines are and how they determine what becomes "news" will now be examined.

Tuchman (1978) likens newswork processes to that of a fisherperson casting a net rather than the traditional notion of casting a news blanket. Unlike a blanket, a net has holes and,

[Its] haul is dependent upon the amount invested in intersecting fiber and the tensile strength of that fiber. The narrower the intersections between the mesh — the more blanketlike the net — the more can be captured. Of course, designing a more expensive narrow mesh presupposes a desire to catch small fish, not a wish to throw them back into the flow of amorphous everyday occurrences (Tuchman 1978: 21)

Today, the news net is intended almost exclusively for big fish, such as sensational crime news like the O.J. Simpson case,⁵ and political developments in the Middle East or Haiti; that is, news stories supposedly appealing to contemporary male news consumers. This consistently leads newspaper organizations to place reporters at centralized locations where they can expect to find a relatively steady stream of potentially newsworthy stories.

Given the exigencies of newswork, it is clear that newswriters could not meet daily deadlines if they began each workday unaware of the locales from which the day's news stories were likely to emanate. As Roshco (1975: 64) explains, "The origins, if not the details, of much of what will be reported as the day's news must, therefore, be anticipated." To this end, newspapers concentrate their resources where significant news often occurs, where important rumours and leaks abound, and where regular press conferences are held (Ericson, *et al* 1989; Chomsky and Herman 1988; Fishman 1980; Tuchman 1978; Sigal 1973). Central nodes of news activity are federal and provincial government ministries, city hall,

⁵ Football hero, actor and sports broadcaster O.J. Simpson has been charged with the double murder of his ex-wife and one of her male friends. For many years the clean-cut, "All-American hero" public image of Simpson has been built up by sports journalists who celebrated his exploits on the gridiron, first at the University of Southern California and then in the National Football League. Corporate advertisers, such as Hertz car rental, who control the major American television networks also lent a hand in fabricating his public persona of Simpson, eager to capitalize on his fame. The success of this image-making campaign is reflected by the fact that Simpson came to be known simply as "The Juice" to millions of adoring fans.

and police departments. Business corporations and economic "think-tan'ks," such as the Fraser Institute, are also regular and credible purveyors of news. With sports, commercial sports organizations such as the Calgary *Stampeders*, the Boston *Bruins* and the Toronto *Blue Jays* constitute central nodes of news activity.

Powerful government and corporate organizations have a distinct advantage over other potential news sources because they are generally recognizable and thus credible due to their status and prestige. As a result, they are regarded as "official" news sources. This is important to newswriters in the sense that reliance on "official" sources is deemed to contribute to the maintenance of the journalistic principle of "objectivity."

Reporters are held accountable by their editors, colleagues, and the reading public that the stories they write are factually accurate and unbiased (Roshco 1975; Tuchman 1972). One strategy that enables newswriters to claim objectivity, as noted above, is reliance on "official" news sources. Essentially, sourcing government and corporate agencies that are *prima facie* credible because of their status and prestige allows newswriters to portray their stories as accurate and objective. As Fishman (1988: 144-145) notes,

[r]eporters operate with the attitude that officials ought to know what it is their job to know.... In particular, a newswriter will recognize an official's claim to knowledge not merely as a claim, but as a credible, competent piece of knowledge. This amounts to a moral division of labor: officials have and give the facts; reporters merely get them.

In this sense, the veracity of facts supplied by official sources is taken for granted because they originate from a *prima facie* credible organization.

What I am suggesting is that newswriters go to these sources because "officials ought to know what it is their job to know." Bureaucratic and corporate officials are expected to have expert knowledge in a particular sphere of activity (Berger, *et al* 1973: 43-44). They are regarded as "competent knowers of specific things" (Fishman 1980: 93). Statistics Canada (StatsCan), for example, is one of the chief sources for stories on the current state of Canada's socio-economic environment. StatsCan officials are expected to know and provide the latest statistics on unemployment, the cost of living, poverty levels, and so on. This information is regarded as factually correct by newswriters because of its origination in an internationally respected federal government agency. Thus, the veracity of a news story built around facts generated by a *prima facie* credible source is virtually unimpeachable.

Routine reliance on certain institutions as official news sources provides an *insulative image* that protects newswriters and their news organizations from criticisms of bias and, ultimately, threats of libel suits (Chomsky and Herman 1988; Tuchman 1972). Hughes' (1964: 94-98) argument that occupations develop ritualized procedures to protect themselves from blame can thus be extended to newswriting. Reliance on official sources that are expected to produce factually correct accounts of events is a "strategic ritual" that entails a claim to objectivity (Tuchman 1972). Newswriters have created a ready-made defence, insulating themselves against criticism by pointing to a news story and claiming, "I am objective because I have sourced a credible organization."

Moreover, as Chomsky and Herman (1988: 19) point out, the need for presumptively accurate news material is also a matter of cost. Gathering information from sources presumed credible, such as the Ministry of Community and Social Services, reduces expenses associated with investigation and

verification of facts. News material from sources that are not *prima facie* credible, for instance most community-based activist groups, requires more extensive verification and cross-checking. Under tight budget constraints and even tighter newspaper production deadlines, it is simply impractical for newswriters to rely on what may be called "unofficial" sources.

In short, newswriters tread a well-beaten path to certain organizations on a news beat as a practical matter. These agencies provide large quantities of presumptively accurate, by journalistic standards at least, and thus factually safe information for newswriters to base their stories on. This saves a great deal of time and money, since newswriters are able to take this information at face-value, its accuracy based on the *prima facie* credibility of the source bureaucracy. Fishman (1980: 143), drawing on Weber (1946), calls this "the principle of bureaucratic affinity: only other bureaucracies can satisfy the input needs of a news bureaucracy." Sources that generate a steady flow of reliable and newsworthy material are a basic requirement of newswriting. These sources become regular subjects on a reporter's news beat.

Taking this a step further, having centralized sources of information on a news beat enables reporters to order the social world more effectively (Tuchman 1978: 23). On any given news beat there are an infinite number of potential news events to which a reporter is exposed. A city beat, for instance, involves far more boards, councils, committees, public and interest groups, schools, and regulatory agencies than could ever be covered by a single reporter, or even a small group of reporters for that matter. To cover all this ground on a routine basis, it is necessary for reporters to "strategically and systematically expose themselves to only a few sources of information within their beat territories" (Fishman 1980: 33).

To manage the amorphous flow of daily occurrences on a beat, reporters concentrate their newsgathering efforts at centralized locations that produce a glut of newsworthy information on a regular basis. This is where the *prima facie* credible organizations come into play — they are the foci of newsworker attention on a beat. In the case of crime news, for example, courts, legislatures and police stations are central nodes of information for newsworkers (Ericson *et al* 1989). The multitude of reports and files generated by these bureaucracies in the course of a day, as well as the concentration of “official knowers” in the form of lawyers, judges, probation officers, and police officers represents a treasure load of newsworthy material for a crime reporter.

An example drawn from Fishman (1980 37-53; cf. Ericson, *et al* 1989) illustrates this point. The justice reporter studied by Fishman (1980) made highly regular, carefully scheduled rounds through specific law enforcement agencies every day, and sometimes several times in a day. A typical day began at 7:00 am. First, he would comb through arrest and investigation reports at the sheriff’s office and city police headquarters, looking for potential news stories. When he found materials for a crime story, he took notes and later, upon returning to the newsroom, typed up a story from them. Significantly, the veracity of the facts contained in these reports was not challenged; rather they were accepted at face-value by the justice reporter. The county courthouse was also a regular stop. Here the justice reporter would “chat with attorneys, bailiffs, or law enforcement officials that he knew” (Fishman 1980: 39). The reporter could count on these actors to have knowledge of the events occurring within their sphere of bureaucratic activity, perhaps tipping him off to interesting court cases or police investigations not part of the public record.

By following this daily 'round of activities,' the justice reporter was able to complete all of his basic coverage work well before the 12:00 pm writing deadline of his news organization. As Fishman (1980) stressed, this was only possible because a large amount of accessible, presumptively accurate and thus reliable, information was concentrated in a few key bureaucratically structured agencies.

This discussion underscores the point that certain formal organizations emerge as routine news sources on a beat, regardless of whether the beat is politics, business or sports. How does this relate to sports? Due to their status as preeminent organizations in the sports world, certain commercial sports organizations are regarded by reporters as central nodes of information. These include the *Hornets*, the *Flames*, and the *Badgers* — exclusively commercial spectator sports organizations. This assertion is tested in Chapter 4. Furthermore, the ability of commercial spectator sports organizations to facilitate newswork by producing a constant supply of news material makes them routine subjects on the sports beat (Theberge and Cronk 1986). The administrative offices of these organizations produce a steady stream of information, such as game statistics, player profiles, status reports on athletes' health, impending player trades and so on. The advantage of this for sports reporters is that a glut of potentially newsworthy story material is centralized in a few locations, thereby facilitating newsgathering and making it easier to meet writing deadlines each day.

Coming full circle back to the analogy presented at the outset of this chapter, organizations that produce accessible and reliable flows of newsworthy information are more often captured in the news net than those which do not. Developing this proposition further requires a closer examination of newsworker and source relations, a fundamental aspect of newsmaking. This discussion is offered in the context of a more general theoretical concern with the consequences

of these interactions between reporter and source for sports newswork and, ultimately, for the content of sports news in the daily press.

Thus far, the picture painted seems to suggest that only newsworkers benefit from their relationship with routine sources on a news beat. This is not the case. The relationship between newsworkers and routine sources is not one-sided, with newsworkers as the sole beneficiaries; rather it is a symbiotic relationship, with sources and newsworkers equally benefiting in terms of satisfying their own interests.

Routine sources welcome the arrangement whereby newsworkers, beat reporters in particular, rely on them for information. In many instances, the source's motive for supplying reporters with vast amounts of news material is not driven by an altruistic desire to keep the public informed; rather, sources view the arrangement as an opportunity to control the flow of information that reporters use to generate news items. As Fishman (1980: 152) points out,

every politician and terrorist knows... news has an instrumental value. To become a routine source of news is to have tremendous power in defining public knowledge of a world outside the individual's immediate experience. Thus, in exchange for free services [the routine supply of information], media organizations bestow on routine news sources equally valuable services: publicity and legitimation.

It is not surprising, then, that news sources are interested in cementing their relationships with reporters in order to advance their own interests. In the words of Lord Tyrell,

You think we lie to you. But we don't lie, really we don't.
 However, when you discover that, you make an even greater error.
 You think we tell you the truth (in Sigal 1973: 131).

Specifically, sources attempt to control what becomes 'news,' and how it is portrayed by the media. They do so by exploiting newsworker dependence on them for raw news material — dependence is used as a *source tactic*.

Routine government and corporate news sources, in particular, have in-house media relations units whose sole purpose is "to meet the journalist's scheduled [information] needs with material their beat agency has generated at its own pace" (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 22). That is, the source's primary objective is to cater to the practical concerns of newsworkers — their need for a steady supply of information — in order to ensure the source's message is reported to the public. This is the case not only with government and corporate bureaucracies, but also with commercial spectator sports organizations.

The existence of sport does not depend on media coverage; however, the success and continued existence of sport *as a commodified form of entertainment and spectacle* does depend on media publicity in the form of news. This notion is rather bluntly stated by Schechter (1970):

No press, no [public] interest, no baseball, no twenty-two year old shit-kicker making thirty-five grand a year, at an animal occupation (in Smith and Valeriotte 1986: 322).

While this "shit-kicker" now earns something more in the area of 'thirty-five grand' a week, the point is well-taken and central to an examination of the mass media-sport linkage.

Koppett (1981) posits that when sport is participant-oriented, when it is played simply for fun, there is no urgent need to advertise sports events, publicize game results and interpret what happened — the *raison d'être* of the newspaper sports section. Commercial spectator sport, however, is a unique form of entertainment that draws its very life's blood from media coverage. He argues the mass media are necessary vehicles for providing the information that generates the public interest which makes commercial sports a profitable business for a few wealthy entrepreneurs:

No commercial sport could be economically self-supporting without some coverage from the media.... when a game or match is over, there are numerous things yet to be discussed: statistics, important plays, records, standings, the overall performances of the players and teams, upcoming games and matches, the rest of the season, next season and so on.... After games or matches have been played, the scores [and event highlights] become sources of entertainment for fans, regardless of whether they were able to attend the event in person (Koppett 1981: 101).

Commercial sports, including professional but also amateur spectator sports, such as the Olympics, and some high-profile university sports, such as football, basketball and hockey, have the greatest need for the publicity that is sports news.

This last point is explored by McFarlane (1955) in his pioneering study of sports promotion in a metropolitan Canadian city. McFarlane (1955: 59) found that commercial sports organizations, as sports promoters, always attempted to have favourable information about their events and athletes placed before the public in the form of news. Essentially, what this "news" coverage amounts to is free advertising (McFarlane 1955; Telander 1984).

To obtain "publicity-as-news," McFarlane (1955) revealed promoters had to persuade media representatives — sports journalists — that only *favourable*

information about their sports product be made public. Promoters hired "press agents" whose job it was to "create specific attitudes towards certain ideas, events or individuals or... [attempt] to change prevailing attitudes towards them."⁶ To this end, McFarlane (1955: 60) emphasizes that press agents relied on ongoing contacts with sports journalists to garner favourable media coverage.

McFarlane (1955: 63) also found that the promoters' publicity staffs were almost exclusively recruited from the ranks of newswriters; sixteen-of-twenty publicity agents in his study were ex-sports writers or, at the time of the study, were employed on a full-time basis in a newspaper office. He identifies three reasons for employing press agents who are experienced in the sports journalism craft:

- (i) they know the type of material sportswriters are interested in, that is, what is "newsworthy";
- (ii) they know to what extent the reporter's job is controlled by rigid time deadlines that must be met daily; and
- (iii) they have developed a wide circle of friends and acquaintances among sportswriters because of their on-the-job associations with them (McFarlane 1955: 63).

McFarlane's findings underscore how an understanding of newswork and newswork routines is utilized in the effort to attain press coverage.

Ericson *et al* (1989) and Altheide (1985) also note the advantages of staffing media relations units with people who have extensive previous experience as newswriters. Ericson *et al* (1989: 7) argue the main advantage is that former

⁶ Here, McFarlane (1955) draws on Park (1925: 37) who wrote that, "In recent years every individual or organization which has to deal with the public.... has come to have its press agent, who is often less an advertising man than a diplomatic man accredited to the newspapers and through them the world at large."

newswriters acquired their "news sense" on the floor of newsrooms. This means they are articulate in the vocabulary of the journalism craft; they understand what constitutes a newsworthy event, are aware of the pressures and constraints of newswriting, the imperative deadlines that must be met, and the constant need for news items. In other words, newswriters-turned-media relations people understand media logic and media formats (Altheide 1985), and they employ this knowledge to gain media exposure to advance their organization's particular interests, as will be shown below.

Sigal (1973:104) notes that newswriters "cannot depend on legwork alone to satisfy [their] paper's insatiable demand for news." This reality of newswriting is used as a source tactic, with media relations staff attempting to "tie-in" newswriters by doing much of the legwork for them; such as, providing good press kits, plenty of photographs, and detailed press releases in readily usable language. Given inflexible deadlines, newswriters "cannot resist the preformed, prescheduled, and factually safe raw materials that bureaucracies provide" (Fishman 1980:152).

Of all the raw materials that sources provide and newswriters routinely rely on, no others compare with the press release and the news conference. These are two principal channels through which most information passes from news sources to reporters (Sigal 1973).

The *press release* is a simple device used by sources whereby they issue statements of current or upcoming events to newswriters and their organizations. Ericson *et al* (1989: 229) refer to these as "knowledge packages," which typically contain a detailed account of an event, including background information, primary facts and perhaps "quotable quotes" from source officials. The press release in effect offers story material to newswriters, making them aware of a potentially

newsworthy event, in a format that facilitates near-verbatim transcription into news copy (Ericson *et al* 1989; Fishman 1980; Sigal 1973; McFarlane 1955).

The press release opens a channel for sources to access the media to promote their interests. With sports, for instance, McFarlane (1955) notes press releases were the most important device used by the press agents he studied to access the media. Indeed, its use was widespread. Drawing on and exploiting their personal contacts among sportswriters, press agents were frequently able to have their releases published as "news." Because of this, McFarlane (1955) concluded the newsgathering powers of sports journalists were emasculated to the point where they performed simply as "rewrite men"; that is, writing stories from the contents of press releases rather than "digging-up" news on their own (McFarlane 1955: 104). Sportswriters thus appear to be promoters' shills.

Beddoes (1970: 65), a sportswriter, echoes these sentiments in his submission to the *Special Senate Committee on the Mass Media* hearings,

there isn't any doubt that sportswriters are bombarded by lobbyists for promotions and often take the easy way out, i.e., they... accept too many publicity releases as pure gospel.

Smith (1976: 15) concurs, arguing that unqualified acceptance of the information contained in a press release is "detrimental to the public interest," as the sports journalist ends up serving the interests of the sports promoter.

Another insidious aspect of the press release is that it is written only from the source perspective and serves source interests (Chomsky and Herman 1988; Fishman 1980). In this sense, press releases have a "promotional" character to them; often they are carefully worked out to provide a biased account of an event or occurrence. As Rosten (1937: 73) points out, in terms of political reporting,

"There are no [press releases] on the failures, scandals, dissensions, and inconsistencies of an administration." McFarlane (1955) and Smith (1976) make similar observations with regard to sports. However, this may not be the case today.

Organizations rush to issue press releases at the first scent of bad publicity. Frederick (1994), a media relations staffer for the *Flames*, called this "damage control", suggesting it is vital to control as much as possible the "spin" put on a particular news event by the media. He was, however, careful to point out the intention of a press release is not to lie, because "if you lie, you have to remember what you said" (Frederick 1994). Ericson, *et al* (1989: 290) point out, "to be seen hiding information would be worse than having the information come out." If the source reveals negative or deviant aspects of the organization's activities in a press release, it has better control over the facts of the deviance and how they will be represented in the media; that is, negative points can be downplayed and positive ones highlighted.

Sources are thus in a position to influence and exercise some control over what becomes news through the use of press releases. Distributing press releases to reporters notifies them of a potentially newsworthy event. Even if newswriters do not reprint the whole press release verbatim, as some have suggested is a routine practice (Ericson 1989; Fishman 1980; Smith 1976; Sigal 1973; McFarlane 1955), the source has still managed to gain media access by bringing an event to the attention of newswriters. Essentially, the source has succeeded in influencing the agenda of public discourse through the media. Newswriters benefit in that the press release is a preformed account of a potentially newsworthy story, thereby moving them one step closer to fulfilling their obligation to produce regular news items about their beat.

The *news conference* has a similar role. Sources use news conferences to access the media to advance their own interests, their own agenda. For example, the Prime Minister may call a conference in an attempt to effect "damage control" over a leaked internal document. Or the chief of police may call a press conference in an effort to quell public fears about a series of murders in the local community, assuring the public that the police are doing all they can, or they are working on a few promising leads. In these instances, sources want to get *their* message, *their* version of events, out to the public through the media.

News conferences "are explicitly designed to allow the source to maintain the upper hand" by controlling the flow of information available to newswriters (Ericson 1989: 293; cf. Sigal 1973: 106-111). The conference format provides a succinct presentation of information, allowing the source to maintain a great deal of control over the proceedings. For example, if questioning gets rough, source officials speaking at the press conference can filibuster, uttering the familiar refrain "no comment," or simply avoid calling on those reporters who may be expected to be "troublesome" based on past experience. Sigal (1973: 108) calls this "finessing the probe," a gambit he notes U.S. President Nixon resorted to at press conferences after the invasion of Cambodia during the Vietnam war. Nixon systematically ignored New York *Times* and Washington *Post* correspondents, even those seated in the front row.

This underscores the relatively high degree of control press conferences give sources in determining what becomes news. Unfortunately, sports sociology literature does not explore news conferences. So, the extrapolation from the general newswork literature to sports is only theoretical at this point, and awaits empirical confirmation based on the results of my fieldwork.

Sources have a lot to gain through their relationship with newswriters. By exploiting reporters' constant need for news material by providing them with prescheduled news events, such as news conferences, and preformed accounts of events, such as press releases, source organizations are generally assured of accessing the media to advance their own interests.

Thus far the analysis has focused on the relationship between reporter and routine news source, and how this relationship influences what becomes news. By implication, the literature suggests that commercial sports organizations supply the bulk of the raw material that reporters fashion into sports news items. Indeed, commercial sports organizations go to great trouble and expense to facilitate sports newswork and thereby become routine news sources, securing for themselves regular and extensive press coverage of their activities. It follows from this that sports news content in metropolitan daily newspapers is based on the promotional materials generated by commercial sports organizations, through press releases and press conferences. At the very least, it is collected as a result of the facilities and services these organizations provide sports reporters.

Reporters not only depend on news material supplied by organizational sources, that is media relations staffers, but also turn to their personal contacts on a sports beat. These sources are most frequently athletes and coaches, the social actors who are the primary subjects of most sports news, but also league and team officials, player agents, team trainers, equipment managers, and front office staff. In short, these contacts are vital and routine news sources. If reporters are to get news about the world of sport — the "inside skinny" — they must maintain their welcome among the players and management, and other social actors in the

commercial sports world (Snider and Spreitzer 1983: 217). As Telander (1984: 4) notes in his analysis of the relationships between athletes and the press in American sport, "Beat reporters are useless if nobody talks to them." There is thus a great deal of pressure on sports reporters to cultivate close, if not personal, relationships with their sources.

In return for cultivating a close relationship with a coach, for instance, a favoured reporter may be given a news story not necessarily made available to other reporters. For example, if a coach has a sports reporter "in his hip pocket" (Smith 1976: 16),

... he will give you a news story when you require one, tip you off to something that is happening (Beddoes 1970: 70).

In return for such "news favours" (Beddoes 1970: 70), sports reporters are likely to reciprocate with favourable copy, perhaps playing up a team's performance when it is in a slump, writing a feature story on an athlete, or promoting an upcoming sports event in their columns. McFarlane (1955) and Telander (1984) suggest the reach of news favours extend so far as to encourage newswriters to actually suppress news that could have a negative impact on a team or, especially, a superstar athlete. In short, sources exploit newswriter dependence on them for information in an effort to obtain favourable press coverage for themselves.

Not only must reporters cultivate close relationships with their sources on the sports beat, but they must also be careful not to alienate themselves from these sources — their lifeblood — by writing news items their sources take offence to. Indeed, they must walk a fine line in writing news items that could potentially offend their sources; a balance must be struck between maintaining positive

relations with their sources and upholding the journalistic principle of objectivity. For reporters who are too critical too often, retaliation is often swift.

An athlete or coach who does not approve of a story, for example, may well accost the sportswriter in the clubhouse the next day. Following a Toronto *Maple Leafs* hockey game, Mike Nykoluk, a *Leafs* assistant coach, having taken exception to some editorial barbs thrust at his "indifferent coaching" by the *Globe and Mail's* Al Strachan, grabbed Strachan and shoved him from the *Leafs* dressing room. "You start running me down, you son of a bitch ... and I don't want you in here. Now get the fuck out 'cause you're no goddamn sports writer!" (Beddoes 1989: 262). Telander (1984: 4) notes athletes can also "intimidate without touching," as when baseball player Warren Cromartie "ominously" pointed his bat at a reporter and warned, "you stay away from me!"

While the threat of a beating at the hands of a disgruntled athlete or coach may be real, sports reporters are more likely to receive the "cold shoulder" in response to an unflattering news story. Based on his experience as a sports reporter, Telander (1984: 4) says it goes like this:

[a] player reads story and is upset; writer returns to locker room to find player mute. If the writer is lucky enough to coax an explanation from the athlete, he/she will hear that the story was unfair because it did at least one of the following: (a) misquoted the athlete; (b) used his quotes out of context; (c) used off-the-record material; (d) mentioned his private life; (e) misinterpreted his philosophy, salary, attitude, or childhood; (f) portrayed him as a bad person; (g) portrayed him as a bad athlete.

This is illustrated by an article in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* (October 6, 1994: A17). The article is critical of Canadian Football League commissioner Larry Smith's decision to cover the Hamilton *Tiger Cats'* payroll one week when the

team couldn't afford to do so; this only a week after Smith told reporters that the league would in no way use its funds for such a bail out. The limited partnership operating the cash-strapped team is headed by Toronto financier David MacDonald, who refused to respond to a reporter's questions as to how the players and staff would be paid for the rest of the year:

I don't comment on private matters.... I'm not going confirm or deny anything to you. I don't ask how big your T4 is, do I?

MacDonald goes on to suggest that,

if you continue to write negative stories about the Ticats and the CFL, you and [Globe and Mail sports reporter] Stephen Brunt and the reporter who writes for Canadian Press will all be out of jobs. There won't be any football to cover, and there already isn't any hockey or baseball for you [to cover].

Clearly, MacDonald was attempting to use his position as an important news source to bully reporters into giving the team and the league favourable coverage; anything short of this would spell the end of not only the franchise, but the whole Canadian Football League.

Further support for Telander's (1984) model of source sanctions is found in Smith and Valeriot's (1986) study of ethics in sports journalism. They report a situation where a reporter wrote an article describing how a hockey player had been "drunk and acted boorishly on the team's flight home." Although the story was true, "the athletes subsequently refused to talk to the reporter" (Smith and Valeriot 1986: 323). As a result, the reporter's "sources of information had dried up," the players on the team refusing to speak to him, and the paper changed his

assignment. Clearly, without reliable access to sources able to supply a steady flow of news material, sports reporters are useless to their paper.

Recalcitrant sports reporters, those who often adopt a critical stance in their reporting that does not serve a source's promotional interests, may find themselves barred from a team's clubhouse or faced with uncooperative players and coaches. For example, the late Harold Ballard owner of the Toronto *Maple Leafs*, used to cultivate a few reporters, rewarding them with interviews which were often controversial and therefore sure to "score points" for the reporter who "dug them up"; he also rewarded sportswriters with access to the team's clubhouse and players. Conversely, those who wrote items offensive to Ballard were dismissed with a curt "Fuck 'em!" (Beddoes 1989: 263). This situation, where sports reporters are driven to pander to the interests of their sources by virtue of their reliance on these sources for news material, led one sports columnist to write:

I just know that it can't go on like this much longer. The media and the [CFL] players' association must bury the hatchet.... My only point was that there could and should be a natural weeding out process, rather than that blanket attitude by some players toward the media.

If a writer is constantly guilty of misquoting players or a broadcaster, in editing a tape, uses that clip which invariably is a stumbling answer to a tough question, then he or she should be ostracized.

But if a writer or broadcaster isn't involved in those games, he or she should be entitled to the time of day, not be ducked by a player only as a matter of principle (in Stebbins 1987: 154).

Again, this underscores how sources recognize sports reporters' dependence on them for news material, and how they exploit this dependence to effect control over news content on the sports pages of metropolitan dailies.

Sports reporters depend on their sources for news material, and sources exploit this dependence in an attempt to control sports news content in the daily press. Offended sources use intimidation and actual physical assault, as well as threats to cut off reporters' access to news material when they don't think they're receiving the kind of press coverage they feel they deserve. The literature implies that, in the face of pressure to write positive sports news items or lose access to their sources, sports reporters may check their objectivity at the door when it comes to writing critical and investigative news items.

The literature also suggests further that sportswriters have sacrificed objectivity by accepting gifts and treats from the commercial sports establishment. In his ground breaking study of sports promotion in a Canadian metropolitan city, McFarlane (1955) revealed that reporters were often offered "treats" in the form of free drinks, free meals, and, in some cases, all-expenses paid trips by promoters in return for writing positive sports copy. Surface (1972) reports similar findings. Drawing on his experience as a former sports reporter, he writes that a reporter covering major league baseball team sits with other writers and team executives in a private lounge in the stadium prior to a game,

as he hears information that the club wishes to reveal and enjoys complimentary liquor and/or dinners. The food is often viewed as a prerogative, though reporters usually can charge their papers \$10 to \$15 a day for food while traveling (Surface 1972: 51).

Surface (1972: 51-52) also found that reporters covering a major commercial sports team regularly received complimentary tickets to games for their friends, "even when influential men complain they cannot buy tickets." Surface (1972) suggests that this state of affairs, with sports reporters regularly enjoying the largesse of commercial sports team owners, turns reporters into "house men" —

bought-off flunkies for team owners and corporate sponsors — who merely promote the team and avoid making any criticism whatsoever of the team and its management in print (*cf.* McFarlane 1955) .

Smith (1976) and Smith and Valeriote (1986) report findings similar to McFarlane (1955) and Surface (1972). Along with the previously mentioned handouts and treats, these studies report that sports newswriters were "producing articles for sports programs, broadcasters were serving as public address announcers at sporting events and Christmas gifts were willingly accepted" (Smith and Valeriote 1986: 319). Smith (1976: 16) notes that while they were aware of these treats, the Edmonton sports newswriters he studied considered them to be "insignificant," and didn't feel that their objectivity was compromised in any way by accepting these blandishments. However, as McFarlane (1955: 82) points out,

these affairs are all designed to create situations where [the promoters'] generosity will be recognized by the recipients. Thus, the recipients will be under certain obligations to the donors... the obligations to the donors may be and are discharged by the granting of favourable publicity for the sports activities, or by refraining from reporting events which the promoters consider to be bad publicity.

Of course, taken by themselves, each treat may be of little importance; for instance, a reporter given a free team jersey or concert tickets is not likely to suppress a major news story. But in a subtle way the promoter is exerting pressure on reporters to write positive sports copy on a regular basis. Regular coverage is of far more value to a commercial sports operation than the suppression of a negative news item.

In other words, the literature implies that commercial sports organizations, and to a lesser extent players and coaches, are primarily interested in obtaining

favourable press coverage of their activities on a regular basis. To do so, commercial sports interests — players and coaches, team owners, management and media relations staffers — attempt to exploit sports reporters' dependence on them for sports news. In short, commercial sports interests seek to exploit their relationships with sports reporters to serve their own promotional interests.

The result of this whole web of relations between sports reporter and source is this: commercial sports organizations institutionalize contacts with newswriters, creating a bridge between themselves and the reading public who consume the sports product. By exploiting their relationships with newswriters, sources succeed in garnering the lion's share of column space in the sports section of metropolitan daily newspapers to promote their product. The scope of sports news is thus limited almost exclusively to coverage of commercial spectator sports and the news is almost invariably positive.

Discussion

Several points emerge from this selective review of newswork literature and sociology of sport literature, and they constitute the infrastructure of the sports newswork model developed in this chapter. The model predicts that newspapers, like any commercial enterprise, are businesses that sell a commodity. What they sell is readers — an "audience commodity" — and their market is other businesses (advertisers). Indeed, metropolitan dailies are advertising-supported businesses, depending on the sale of advertising space to generate the bulk of their revenue.

Thus, metropolitan dailies have to produce an audience commodity that is attractive to advertisers. In the case of sports audiences, this ideal audience is predominantly male. The model predicts the *Examiner* will have a distinct commercial sports bias, since it is perceived in the news industry that male readers are best attracted with extensive coverage of commercial spectator sports. In short, metropolitan dailies depend on commercial spectator sports news to "deliver the male" (Sparks 1992).

The obligation to generate this steady flow of commercial sports news falls on sports reporters. Reporters face relentless pressure every day from their news organizations to produce a variable quantity of fresh sports news from their beats. That nothing newsworthy has actually happened on a beat, however, is no excuse for not generating news. Moreover, this daily quantum of news must be generated under the constraints of inflexible deadlines set by the newspaper organization, and which are beyond reporters' control. Reporters have to allocate their time and arrange their newsgathering schedules so they can write and submit items in accordance with organizational deadlines. To this end, it is imperative that reporters have sources on their beats who they can count on to provide a glut of raw news material, and who do this in concert with organizational deadlines. As the literature shows, sources with the capacity to meet this need become routine news sources.

External economic forces also affect newswork. With advertising revenues declining over the past several years, newspaper organizations have been forced to economize by slashing operating budgets, and, particularly, by downsizing their reporting staffs. This has had a significant impact on the approach metropolitan dailies take to news coverage. Essentially, fewer newswriters are available to cover news beats, yet they are expected to produce enough news stories every day

to fill a news hole that is not shrinking. For example, while operating budget cuts may force a newspaper to downsize its staff of sports reporters, the actual amount of space — the news hole — in the sports section that has to be filled each day remains virtually constant. The result is fewer reporters are under increasing pressure to produce sports news every day.

In response to the scarcity of human and financial resources they face, newspaper organizations concentrate their resources where they can expect significant news to occur on a routine basis. Forced to "do more with less," today's news media place reporters at centralized locations on a news beat where they can expect to find a steady stream of news material. Moreover, because assigning a newsworker to a beat constitutes a significant investment of a newspaper's human and financial resources, only organizations that are expected to produce a steady stream of newsworthy information on a regular basis are assigned beat reporters — they become routine news sources. In light of this, the model predicts that only the offices of commercial sports leagues, organizations and individual teams constitute central nodes of news activity on the sports beat.

The second major point raised by the literature is that sources which provide predictably available supplies of news material are a reporter's "lifeblood." Through their media relations offices, commercial sports organizations regularly issue an avalanche of press releases that not only notify newsworkers of potentially newsworthy items, but are written in usable language that facilitates near-verbatim transcription. They also schedule press conferences at hours well-suited to newspaper deadlines. As well, commercial sports entities provide reporters with facilities, such as fully equipped press boxes at event venues and conference rooms in the team clubhouse, in which to interview athletes, coaches and team officials. In short, the model predicts that sports newswork is facilitated by commercial

sports organizations and newswriters have come to rely on this. From here, it is but a short step from reliance to dependence.

The key social actors who comprise the commercial sports world exploit newswriter dependence on them for news material in an effort to obtain favourable press coverage. Going to media relations staffers, athletes, coaches, player agents and league and team officials for "inside" information on the sports world is a primary newsgathering routine reporters follow. Because reporters rely so heavily on access to these sources, the model predicts sports reporters may be inclined to mute criticism of a team or athlete if their future access to these valuable news sources would be jeopardized. For example, newswriters may be barred from team's clubhouse after writing a controversial article, or an athlete may refuse to answer questions during an interview, possibly going so far as to refuse to be interviewed at all by a certain reporter whom s/he does not like. Conversely, those reporters who consistently write positive sports copy and have developed close relationships with their sources may be "rewarded" with information not readily available to other reporters, such as a tip-off to an impending trade or coaching change or who may be a team's first pick in the annual amateur draft.

In effect, routine sources *subsidize* the mass media; all the services and facilities they provide reporters make sports newswriting more manageable. In return, routine sources gain regular access to the public through the media by facilitating sports newswriting. Providing this subsidy ensures that commercial sports organizations have "privileged access to the gates" (Chomsky and Herman 1988: 22); that is, they receive an inordinate amount of press coverage. Conversely, non-commercial sports must struggle for access. They lack the resources to invest in obtaining regular media coverage; for instance, they cannot

afford such luxuries as media relations staff, nor are they covered by the wire services. The inability of non-commercial sports to subsidize the mass media results in minimal media coverage of their activities. This has less to do with bias against them than it does with practical matters — in casting the news net, newswriters are constrained by their dependence on accessible news subjects which provide a steady supply of news material. Commercial spectator sports almost invariably constitute these news subjects.

Reporters need a readily accessible and constant supply of news material in order to meet the demands of generating sports news every day. Thus they gravitate to commercial spectator sports organizations because they are best equipped to satisfy this need. The press releases, press conferences, post-game interviews with athletes and coaches, "inside" tip-offs and rumours, provided by sources are the primary channels through which information is passed from source to newswriter. For their contribution to facilitating newswriting — for opening and maintaining these channels — commercial sports organizations are rewarded with the status of "routine news source" and enjoy the attendant media coverage.

The importance of obtaining media coverage is the third key point arising from the literature review. Beat reporters' need for a steady flow of reliable and accessible news material is well-served by commercial spectator sports' need for publicity and recognition. Commercial sports organizations want to generate as much public interest in their product as possible and, arguably, the most effective means of doing so is to obtain consistent media coverage of sports events in the form of "news." Quite simply, commercial sports depend on the advertising that sports "news" represents. In this sense, the model predicts that "publicity-as-news" is a promotional tool, and will be actively sought out and coveted by

Alklemorb's commercial sports organizations as a means to foster increasing public interest in their sports product.

The literature reviewed clearly indicates that news organizations and sports reporters, beat reporters in particular, are engaged in a *symbiotic relationship* with commercial spectator sports. On the one hand, commercial sports organizations satisfy the reporter's need for a steady flow of news material; on the other hand, reporters satisfy commercial sports' need for publicity and recognition. The product of this relationship is a saturation of the sports pages of metropolitan daily newspapers with a range of sports coverage limited almost exclusively to news about commercial spectator sports.

Summary

In this chapter I developed a model of sports newswork routines, based on a selective review of newswork literature and sociology of sport literature, to provide a framework for investigating the primary thesis of this study: that commercial spectator sports receive a vast amount of coverage in the daily press, far surpassing that afforded to most non-commercial sports, largely as a result of their ability to facilitate sports newswork.

Sports newswork is performed in an extremely demanding environment, wherein beat reporters in particular face unrelenting pressure to generate fresh sports news every day; this must be done under the constraints of fixed deadlines beyond their control. By providing reporters with access to a constant supply of information, the raw material of sports news, commercial sports organizations help reporters cope with the exigencies of sports newswork — in effect, they facilitate

newswork. In return, commercial sports secure for themselves the majority of column space in the sports section of metropolitan dailies. The model developed is used as a framework to interpret the empirical material gathered during my fieldwork, the subject of Chapters 4 and 5.

CHAPTER 3

Method

The facts about places, people, and organization do more than give readers a general familiarity [about the organization the research was conducted in]. Social organizations work the way the research report says they do only with the right kinds of people and in the right kind of places. So preliminary descriptive materials set down some of the basic premises upon which the report's argument rests.

— Howard Becker (1986: 62)

This study involved two related qualitative methodological strategies. First, literature reviews of two substantive areas, newswork and sports sociology, that produced a testable model of sports newswork routines. Second, field research involving a series of observations and interviews carried out at the *Alklemorb Examiner*, a metropolitan daily newspaper in eastern Ontario.⁷ To supplement the second phase, interviews were conducted during the same period with five media relations staffers of two major commercial sports teams, the *Hornets* of the NHL and the *Flames* of the CFL.

The field observation and interview component of the study occurred in two stages. First, in July, 1994 I began a series of visits to the newsroom of the

⁷ To protect anonymity, all individuals and organizations in "*Alkiemorb*" have been given pseudonyms.

Examiner to observe the daily construction of the paper's sports section, and to speak with sports newswriters as they went about their work. I also conducted interviews with the media relations staffers of sports teams. Second, in August, 1994, I returned to the *Examiner* on several occasions to conduct follow-up interviews with newswriters and to gather further observational data.

Initially, I intended to conduct my field research at the *Observer*, the *Examiner*'s chief competitor. In early June, 1994, I telephoned the *Observer*'s senior sports editor, Tom Finnegan, at his home and introduced myself as a Master's student at Carleton University who was studying sports journalism. I explained that I was specifically interested in learning how the sports section of a metropolitan daily newspaper is put together from the ground up every day. I told Finnegan I wanted to immerse myself in the *Observer*'s sports newswriting environment, observing first-hand the work routines of its sports newswriters. Finnegan expressed genuine interest in this project, indicating there would be no problem with spending a week or so observing the "goings on" of the *Observer*'s sports desk. He told me to call him at work the following Monday morning and we would then make arrangements for me to come in to look around, meet him and his staff and, in his words, "get the ball rolling."

I called Finnegan Monday morning at approximately 11:30 am. This is when the problems began.⁸ Finnegan (1994) told me that "this wasn't a good week," because "[we're] just too busy down here," and I should call him early the next week. So I telephoned him the following Monday morning at approximately

⁸ Finnegan said this was the best time to reach him because it is right after their first "story meeting." This is when the paper's various editors get together to discuss the make-up of that day's edition; that is, how much space will be allocated to each section of the paper, what stories will run front page, and so on.

9:30 am -- hoping to catch him when he first arrived at his office — and, yet again, was stymied:

I haven't forgotten about you but it's been crazy down here....
Look, give me your home number and I'll call you in a few days
when things slow down (Finnegan 1994).

A week passed and I hadn't heard from Finnegan, so I called him first thing the next Monday morning, at approximately 9:00 am, hoping to speak to him before he got too busy. However, no such luck; he was already in meetings. I left a message for him to call me at home when he could. It was late that afternoon before he returned my call, apologizing for not getting back to me earlier but, as usual, he was "swamped with work all day" (Finnegan 1994).

By this point I had become somewhat frustrated that three weeks had passed since Finnegan had assured me I could begin my fieldwork at the *Observer*. Without being too aggressive, I indicated to him that it was important for me to begin my observations as soon as possible, given that I was working under a deadline that was rapidly approaching. Finnegan was sympathetic and told me not to worry, that "we'll get this taken care of soon." Significantly, Finnegan closed the conversation with yet another promise: "I'll get back to you as soon as I can, I promise." He never has called me back.

I want to make it clear that I don't think Finnegan was in any way trying to prevent me from observing his paper's sports desk. From the first time we spoke to our last contact, Finnegan was not the least bit put off by the idea of my "hanging around" the sports desk. He was just too "swamped" with work to make the arrangements for me to begin my fieldwork.

Even though these events delayed the start of my fieldwork by almost a month, this experience certainly gave me insight into how busy the world of the sports newswriter is. Notice that the factor preventing me from beginning my fieldwork at the *Observer* was time: "too busy," "swamped," and "it's crazy down here." Indeed, rare was the occasion when I called Finnegan at the *Observer* that I was able to speak to him right away; he was usually in a meeting, talking to one of his reporters about a story or speaking to someone on the phone. This was my first exposure to the extent that the rhythm of sports newswriting is governed by time, a point that crops up repeatedly in my fieldwork.

Because of the difficulty I was having, I decided to see if I could access *Alklemorb's* other major daily, the *Examiner*. It has a weekly (Monday to Friday) circulation of approximately 52,290 readers in a market area of approximately 710,000 adults over the age of 18 years (*Canadian Advertising Rates and Data*, June 1994). Unlike the *Observer*, which follows the traditional "broadsheet" format, the *Examiner* is a "tabloid" style publication. This means its pages are smaller and stories tend to be shorter. For example, the *Examiner* has a "Just the Facts" feature where the highlights of a major news item are printed in a box beside the story to allow readers to get the gist of a news item without having to read the whole item.

I telephoned Bob Roberts, the *Examiner's* sports editor, on the afternoon of July 7, 1994, to see if he would grant me access to the paper's newsroom. I introduced myself in the same manner as I did with Finnegan. And like Finnegan, Roberts was interested in what I was doing; we spent almost forty minutes discussing my project and sports newswriting generally. Roberts closed the conversation by telling me I could spend as much time at the paper as I needed, and I could drop by the following Monday afternoon to start.

I arrived at the *Examiner* for the first of several visits at approximately 4:00 pm on July 11, 1994. The paper is located in a large, new-looking building that it shares with several other businesses, including the *Financial Post* and a fitness club. There is a large sign at the front of the building advertising the various businesses housed inside. The building is located in the southeast end of the city, across from a golf course and on the edge of the international airport, next to a housing subdivision. The *Examiner's* business offices and newsroom are located in the front of the building, overlooking the street and golf course.

I entered the *Examiner's* lobby where I was greeted by a receptionist whose small, cluttered work station was located on the right side of the room. To the left of the foyer I could see the newsroom through glaze glass windows. Straight ahead was a narrow hallway that I later learned led to the washrooms. I informed the receptionist I had an appointment with Roberts, and he led me into the newsroom. Amid the hustle and bustle, Roberts was pointed out to me: "He's the ugly one with the mustache," said the receptionist.

After greeting me and making some small talk, Roberts introduced me to the sports staffers who were present in the newsroom. As a Carleton University student writing a Master's thesis about sports journalism, he said that I would be studying them for awhile and stressed that they should feel free to help me out however they could (Roberts 1994). Roberts' sweeping introduction, because of his status as the senior sports editor, legitimized my presence at the *Examiner*. I had his backing; what I was doing was important and cooperation was needed and expected. In this sense, my route into the *Examiner* was from the "top-down" rather than from the "bottom-up" (Cavanagh 1989: 218).

Initially, I was concerned that I might run into the same problems as Cavanagh (1989: 218-221) in his study of the production of sports for CBC

television. Cavanagh (1989) reports that he was initially treated with a certain amount of suspicion by producers and production staff because of his route into the CBC from the "top-down"; that is, through the Deputy Head of TV Sports. Staffers believed Cavanagh was from CBC Headquarters in Ottawa, performing some sort of efficiency rating or audit on the department, and it was a while before their misconceptions were allayed.

My experience was quite the contrary. It became clear in a few hours on my first visit to the *Examiner* that the sports newswriters were genuinely interested in my project. They willingly took time out of their hectic schedules to speak with me whenever I had a question. Not once did I feel I was talked down to, or questioned about a possible hidden agenda in studying sports newswriting at the paper. Furthermore, all those interviewed were quite open about their thoughts, philosophies and criticisms of commercial sports generally, and sports newswriting specifically.

The *Examiner* has a staff of ten sports newswriters. There are two editors. Bob Roberts is the senior sports editor, and is 35 years old. After spending two years in a degree program in physical education, he switched to a journalism diploma program at a community college. He has been doing sports newswriting for twelve years; six years as a reporter, and the last six years as an editor at various papers. Jim McDermott is the assistant sports editor. Thirty-five years old, he holds a diploma in journalism from a community college and has been doing newswriting for thirteen years; eleven as a reporter (nine years in sports and the other two in business/entertainment reporting), and two as an assistant sports editor.

The paper has three beat reporters. Buck Colvin covers the *Hornets* of the National Hockey League. Colvin is a 29 year-old with eight years experience as a

sports reporter; three of these spent covering the Flames for the *Examiner*. He has a journalism diploma from a community college. Bobby Barnes covers the *Flames* of the Canadian Football League. Pete Dewey covers the *Badgers, Alklemorb's* Triple 'AAA' baseball club. Dewey is a 28 year-old and has been working as a full-time sports reporter for three years, since obtaining his journalism diploma from a community college.

The paper has two regular columnists. Skip Slider is well-known for his controversial columns in the paper, and his daily sports commentaries for a local FM radio station. He is the only member of the *Examiner's* sports staff that I was unable to interview. Since Slider writes his daily columns from home, and his appearance in the paper's newsroom is rare, he was generally unavailable to interview when I was doing my fieldwork at the paper. Tom Lowenstein is 36 years old and has only been writing his daily column for about six months. He has been a sports newsworker for ten years. He almost completed a degree in journalism from a university, needing only to complete an Honours thesis, but chose to leave school when offered a full-time sports reporting job.

The *Examiner* has two "desklers" or "production assistants" who rarely cover news events, but are responsible for getting the sports section ready for publication every day. This involves a number of tasks, such as editing copy, selecting photos, doing page layout, and preparing the agate pages.⁹ Sam Snead, in addition to his sports desk duties, writes a weekly column on network television and sports. Snead is 36 years old and has been doing sports newswork for almost fifteen years. He has a diploma in journalism from a community college. Tara Jill

⁹ Agate are the minutiae of statistics, team standings and game results. Theberge and Cronk (1986: 200) suggest that agate "is to the sports section what stocks are to the business section. It's not pretty, it's in small type, and it's hard to read. But both have high readership."

is the only female sports newsworker at the paper. In addition to her desk duties, Jill is a part-time sports reporter.¹⁰

Finally, the *Examiner* has one freelance reporter who regularly contributes sports news items. Chet Burkley is generally responsible for covering *Alklemorb's* university and college sports scene; he also regularly writes on harness racing. Burkley is a 25 year-old with a university degree in journalism. He has been working at the *Examiner* for four years, first as a copy chaser, now as a freelancer.

Generally speaking, the typical *Examiner* sports newsworker is a 33 year-old white male with about ten years experience as a sports newsworker. He also has a community college diploma in journalism.

An interesting feature of the layout of the *Examiner's* newsroom is the economy of space; all physical space is maximized for the production of news. Ceiling space is utilized, with television sets suspended from the ceiling so reporters can watch news programs throughout the day and evening, 'just to see if anything's broken, or how the others [news organizations] are handling a story' (Burkley 1994).¹¹ Wall space doubles as a bulletin board, with posters and notes pasted all over the place. Floor space is also fully exploited; reporters' work stations, which are basically small cubicles, line every wall and stretch straight down the middle of the newsroom. Each cubicle is sparsely furnished with a chair, telephone and an extremely old-looking computer terminal. Not only were these computers old, but of poor quality, obviously pushed well beyond their years of optimum performance. I witnessed three occasions when sports reporters lost

¹⁰ Biographical information is not available for Jill, as she was on vacation when I was collecting this data. This is also the case with Barnes.

¹¹ Interestingly, on my first visit to the paper, when the local 6:00 pm news broadcast came on air, someone (I later learned it was the City editor) barked, 'Who's got the news?' A reporter shouted back 'I do,' and, with pen and pad in hand, took notes of the broadcast.

stories they were working on. This apparently is a regular occurrence — ‘Oh shit, it happens all the time. I lose a story probably two or three times a week... you just get used to it.... We had better computers at J-school’ (Burkley 1994). Even the space in these work stations is fully utilized. Sports newsworker cubicles (which are the ones I was able to most closely observe) are littered with press releases, media guides and other such printed material; the walls are plastered with pieces of paper, the information appearing to be mostly telephone numbers, statistics and reminders of various sorts. The clutter of most work stations is an apt metaphor for the chaotic newswork environment at the *Examiner*, which I describe below.

One striking feature of these work stations is the lack of privacy; the walls separating the cubicles are only shoulder-high when a person is sitting down. I asked Roberts (1994) about this; doesn’t the lack of privacy make it difficult to concentrate? ‘Not really. They’re always talking to each other, exchanging information, asking questions, that sort of thing. So if we had walls reaching to the ceiling or whatever you obviously wouldn’t be able to do this.’ What Roberts implies is that newsmaking is a creative process which encourages, to a degree, collaboration among newsworkers in constructing news — a sharing of information and ideas. In short, the newsroom layout contributes to the creative process behind constructing news. Just as important, the layout, by facilitating a collaborative atmosphere, helps newsworkers generate news in a pressure-filled environment where deadlines always seem to be looming.

Sports newswork at the *Examiner* is carried out at a very hectic pace. Indeed, at first glance to an outsider, activity in the newsroom seems completely incoherent, a hopeless ball of confusion; it is akin to the organized chaos which marks activity on the floor of the Toronto Stock Exchange. Sports newsworkers

typically work a 3 to 11 pm shift, and as the evening wears on and deadline approaches the pace picks up. As reporters scramble to finish their stories and editors and deskers await these news items so they can layout the sports pages, a constant barrage of questions and orders pounds the ears — "Who pitched for the Jays last night? What's his ERA?", "Do you know if Barrett is starting tonight or is he still benched?"; "Hey Colvin! What's going on with Turlotte, can you get confirmation from the *Hornets* that he's on the trading block or not?"; "Who's covering the diving competition?" But it turns out this helter skelter approach to newswork is part of the creative process I referred to above. Colvin (1994) explained that a lot of stories are written in this collaborative manner, with information being shouted back and forth,

you know, I'll read a graph to Barnes if he's in ear shot to see if he thinks it sounds good — we do this a lot for our leads — or I'll ask him, you know, what's Kulka's [injury] status for tonight, is he playing or what?

This hectic pace of sports newswork at the *Examiner* made it necessary to conduct most of my interviews "on the fly"; the organized chaos of the newsroom generally did not allow for long protracted interviews. However, I was fortunate that the newswriters often made an effort to escape the newsroom to allow me to conduct more formally structured interviews. These were often set up at a moment's notice and all were carried out in the cafeteria. To this end, I carried a series of questions — an interview schedule — in the back of my field diary.

To initiate an interview, I approached newswriters in a conversational manner, trying to relate to them on a level of shared affection for sports and sports journalism, rather than as a detached social scientist. I found it was particularly useful to tell them I had been a varsity football player at Carleton University for

five years; this was a great "ice-breaker" and led to many interesting conversations, especially with a few of the reporters who had, at various times, covered university football in the city. This approach worked well, and after a short while I was on a first name basis with all of the sports newswriters.

Each interview began with my explaining that I was interested in how the sports section of a metropolitan daily newspaper is put together each day, and what their role in this process is, either as a reporter or editor. I discussed anonymity and confidentiality, explaining how I would blend their views and opinions in with their colleagues, both in the analysis and in the writing. I told them I would illustrate and highlight certain points by using anecdotes from individual interviews, and explained that I would identify them with either pseudonyms or by their position title (*e.g.* editor or beat reporter).

I then asked them to tell me about their work, beginning with a general overview of what their job is all about. As these discussions unfolded, I interjected questions along the way, loosely following the interview schedule, trying to focus the interview. In fact, the interview schedule was used only as a guide, and no attempt was made to restrict the interview subject too much to any one topic. This allowed for probing and following leads provided by the respondent. In fact, exploring the channels opened up by respondents offered a wealth of information that likely would not have come to the surface had I strictly adhered to an interview schedule. People were very candid in their responses to sometimes difficult and possibly uncomfortable questions. For example, when asked point-blank why commercial sports receive so much coverage in the paper and non-commercial sports so little — a potentially threatening question, and one which is often posed to sports newswriters in the mainstream press, it turns out (Roberts 1994) — not one respondent avoided making a direct and forthright response.

Indeed, they did not hesitate in pointing to the economic logic of such biased coverage: 'Because that's what people want to read about' and '[That's] what gets you readers' were typical responses.

I believe this frankness was, in large part, a reflection of voluntary participation. From the outset, the *Examiner's* sports newswriters demonstrated a great deal of enthusiasm for this study, with many going out of their way to ensure I captured as much data as possible — 'You should talk to Barnes about that,' 'Are you going to look at...' and 'I really want to read this when you're done' are typical of the support I received. One reporter even gave me his home phone number so I could call him 'any time' I had a question. This enthusiasm and support greatly contributed to the depth of analysis this study was able to achieve.

Interviews lasted from 40 to 60 minutes on average, depending on how busy the newswriter was. All interviews were tape recorded, and not one subject objected to this. Indeed, several seemed amused that they were now the ones being interviewed, sitting on the other side of the fence so-to-speak. One respondent commented that he "felt like a jock under the microscope after a big game" (Burkley 1994). In addition to the interview data, a lot of empirical material was obtained by making an observation and then approaching a newswriter to ask about it. For example, when I observed a reporter casually stroll over to the fax machine and begin to sift through the faxes that had arrived in the last fifteen minutes or so I asked him, 'What are they? Get a lot of them?' These two simple questions led to a twenty minute discussion of press releases and their importance to sports newswriting; in fact, this is the basis for my discussion of press releases in Chapter 5.

In terms of data analysis, the primary task was to uncover patterns in sports newswork routines to see if they confirmed the analytical model developed in Chapter 2. This began with the process of transcribing interviews. This was usually done in the late evening (in most instances after midnight) after I returned home from the paper; rarely did more than a day pass before an interview was transcribed. As I was transcribing, I embedded comments ranging in length from a single word or phrase (e.g. 'relevance of press releases') to a few paragraphs, in the transcript. These were recorded directly as they occurred to me, sometimes mid-sentence during the transcribing, and were placed in brackets with a different font type in order to set them apart from the actual text of the interview. These comments were most useful when analyzing the data, as they often triggered ideas I had thought of while the interview was going on, or had occurred to me while transcribing the interview — essentially, they reminded me of ideas I had forgotten about, since in some cases they had occurred a few months prior to the actual analysis.

Another valuable source of data was my field diary, where I recorded snippets of conversations, observations and ideas. These notes were recorded usually as they occurred to me, or later on when things were slow in the newsroom. Impressions and reflections of my day at the paper were recorded fairly regularly in the field diary, usually at night on my bus ride home from the paper, or at home when I was trying to relax after several hours spent in a fast-paced, hectic and, for me at least, stressful environment.

After the fieldwork was finished, and all the interviews transcribed, I began the data analysis. I re-examined the sports newswork model, identifying its key points. Each of these key points became a separate analytical category, for which

a file was established; for example, "Press releases," "Press conferences" and "Importance of advertising to newspaper revenue" were distinct categories.

I should note that these were electronic files, created on a Macintosh computer using a software application called Microsoft Word. It was not until well into the analysis that I actually worked with "hard" copies of these files. I found this method to be far superior to the old "cut and paste" technique, where paper copies of transcripts were literally cut up and rearranged into separate files; such a labour-intensive process didn't interest me in the least, given the ease with which text can be moved around by computer.

Once these initial analytical categories were established, I read each of the typed interviews (these were printed copies), examining them for comments or opinions on any aspect of sports newswork which were related to the categories. At this initial stage of analysis, I was not at all selective; even comments marginally related to a category were flagged. Each flagged statement was then copied from the electronic text of the transcript to the appropriate category file. Thus, a comment on the importance of press releases to doing sports newswork was copied from the interview file to the "Press releases" category file. Many interview clippings found their way into several different files. In each category file, all statements were identified by interview number, pseudonym of the interviewee, and their job type (e.g. beat reporter, freelancer, media relations staffer). All interviews were "cut up" in this manner. However, a different approach was taken with the field diary. Rather than transcribing these notes verbatim into a "Field Diary" file and then moving data from this file into a category file, I instead typed these notes directly into the appropriate categories. This was more of a time-saving measure than anything, as I would have preferred to have an electronic file to work from.

Next, I proceeded through each of these files making finer distinctions, developing subcategories based on the material that was there. Some categories were merged, while others were thrown out or re-worked entirely. I then returned to the printed interview transcripts and analyzed them again on the basis of the refined categories, excavating additional material and entering it under the appropriate file heading. When finished, I had identified about 12 analytical categories — “about” because these categories were never static; they were constantly modified as I worked with and massaged the data over a period of nearly five months, the time spent writing up the data.

In all, the findings presented in this study are based on data collected over seventy hours of observing and interviewing ten sports newswriters at the same news organization. In addition, approximately seven hours were spent interviewing five media relations staffers employed by two commercial sports organizations, the *Hornets* and the *Flames*. These data are presented in the next two chapters

CHAPTER 4

Facilitating Sports Newswork: exploring the symbiotic relationship between mass media and commercial sports

In a sense, we have a 50/50 relationship with the media. We can't survive without them and their coverage to the fan; on the other hand, they have a duty to cover us for the fans, so it's a good relationship.

— Jones (1994)

This chapter explores the symbiotic relationship between the *Examiner* and commercial sports organizations: how it is forged, and its effect on sports news content in the metropolitan daily press. Ultimately, we see that commercial sports organizations go to great lengths to facilitate sports newswork in order to obtain for themselves regular and extensive coverage of their activities.

Mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with commercial spectator sports; they need each other to exist and prosper. Two factors contribute to this: reciprocity of interest and economic necessity. Commercial sports organizations go to great lengths and expense to facilitate sports newswork in order to obtain maximum media coverage of their activities. Newspaper organizations devote the bulk of their sports news space to reporting activities in

the commercial sports world not simply because this is what people want to read about, but significantly, as a means to manufacture a "quality" audience commodity to sell to advertisers. This is a matter of *economic necessity*.

Thus, newspapers' need for a steady flow of commercial sports news is reciprocated by commercial sports' need for extensive news coverage. This is akin to what Fishman (1980: 143) calls "the principle of bureaucratic affinity: only other [organizations] can supply the input needs of a news [organization]." In this sense, only commercial sports organizations can provide metropolitan daily newspapers with what they need — news of the commercial sports world. Likewise, only news organizations such as the *Examiner* can satisfy commercial spectator sports' need for massive amounts of media coverage. In a nutshell, they *reciprocate* each other's interests.

As we saw in the first chapter, newspaper organizations are businesses which sell access to their readership to other businesses (advertisers). Readers themselves are the products generated by the news industry — readership is an *audience commodity* (Jhally 1990; 1984; 1982; Leiss *et al* 1990; Chomsky and Herman 1988). However, it is not enough to have a large audience; it must be a "quality" one, that is, a clearly identifiable demographic. In the case of sports, this demographic is ideally composed of eighteen to forty-nine year-old males (Sparks 1992; Bagdikian 1992; Jhally 1984, 1982; Parente 1977; McPherson 1975). Metropolitan daily newspapers devote the bulk of their news space to coverage of commercial sports because it is believed they best attract this male audience (Theberge and Cronk 1986; Rintala and Birrell 1984; Beamish 1984). This is evidenced by content analyses of metropolitan dailies, which clearly underscore the commercial sports bias in the daily press (Gelinas and Theberge 1986; Rintala and Birrell 1984; Lever and Wheeler 1984; Bryant 1980; Scanlon 1970). Thus, the

argument goes, providing more coverage of these sports makes a paper's audience commodity more marketable. Commercial sports, then, are "cash cows." And newspaper organizations depend on them to "deliver the male" (Sparks 1992).

There is little doubt the *Examiner's* sports news values are masculine in focus for the purpose of building a specific male-dominated audience commodity. This is reflected in its sports coverage: commercial spectator sports are the centerpiece of the paper's sports section. "We build the [sports] section around the big sports that our readers want to know about," notes Roberts (1994), the *Examiner's* sports editor. Top priority is given to reporting almost exclusively on the activities of commercial sports because it is believed this is the sort of sports news that will attract a quality audience. Several sports newswriters emphasized this point with their responses to the question, Why does the *Examiner* have so much coverage of professional sports?

We have so much coverage of them obviously because they're big time sports... people want to read about them (Snead 1994).

Your readers want to know what's happening with [commercial sports], you know, that's where the public's interest is. They want to know about professional sports. It's that simple (McDermott 1994).

People want to read about professional sports, the big leagues, you know.... A lot of people don't watch little Billy go play ball at Trillium Park on a Friday night. I mean how much interest is there in amateur sports like that? Not enough to warrant a lot of coverage (Colvin 1994)

We build the section around the big sports that our readers want to know about (Roberts 1994).

In light of this, every day the first concern in sketching out the content of the sports section is with activities in the commercial sports world. The *raison d'être* of any metropolitan daily's sports section is reporting game results from the previous day, player trades and signings, injury reports on star athletes, and the current status of any labour unrest that may be ongoing or looming on the horizon.¹² As one reporter remarks: "This is the stuff people want to read about" (Burkley 1994). It is clear from the above comments that the *Examiner* builds its audience commodity by providing extensive coverage of commercial sports.

In all, the *Examiner* depends on commercial sports to provide the bulk of its sports news content for economic reasons: this is what attracts the quality audience it needs to sell advertisers. Given the pervasiveness of commercial spectator sports in contemporary society, the problem is not that there is any shortage of commercial sports; indeed nothing could be further from fact. Rather, the problem facing news organizations like the *Examiner* is how to cover the vast expanse of the commercial sports world, to somehow impose order on it. And this is where a paper's coverage strategy comes into play.

The *Examiner* employs a coverage strategy which affords it access to a steady supply of commercial sports news. In other words, the paper anchors its news net so as to capture as much commercial sports news material as possible. Yet with countless sports events taking place every day, the paper does not expect

¹² As I write, labour unrest runs rampant among the commercial sports world. Major League baseball players have been on strike since August of this year. The National Hockey League's season ground to a halt before it even got under way, with the player's union and team owners unable to sign a new collective bargaining agreement. There are rumblings in the Canadian Football League that several franchises, among them the Hamilton *Tiger Cats* and the Calgary *Stampeders*, are on such shaky financial ground they may relocate to more lucrative markets (read: United States).

to be able to cover everything. As the assistant sports editor at the *Examiner* put it,

Obviously we can't have somebody covering a hockey game in Pittsburgh, in Colorado, and in Toronto, you know, on the same night. It just isn't possible for any paper to have that kind of coverage. Can you imagine the size of the staff you'd need and the money it would take to fly them all over the place? It just isn't possible; it would be nice, though. (McDermott 1994).

Quite simply, it costs a lot of money for a news organization to maintain a staff of reporters and editors, not to mention all the other newswriters involved in the more technical end of producing a metropolitan daily newspaper — photographers, graphic artists, press operators, truck drivers, and advertising sales staff. Clearly, then, economics largely determine the *Examiner's* coverage strategy.

It was suggested in the previous chapter that many Canadian dailies have been actively downsizing their reporting and editorial staffs in light of these economic concerns. This is not the case with the *Examiner*. According to the senior sports editor, "we haven't had any real cuts or anything like that; we run a pretty tight ship and since we opened shop here in Ottawa we haven't grown beyond our budget" (Roberts 1994). Nonetheless, Roberts (1994) suggests the *Examiner* is indeed understaffed, given the size of the region's sports scene,

Oh yeah, sure I could use more reporters — more reporters means bigger and better coverage. But it isn't in the budget. We just have to work a little harder ... there's a lot of sports going on here; this is a big city, and because we're a big city paper, we've got to cover as much as we can But ... we don't have an unlimited budget — I've only got so much money to work with (emphasis added).

A small sports reporting staff combined with a tight operating budget limits the size of the news net the organization has to cast. Economic necessity demands that newspaper organizations "work harder" and "do more with less" to provide coverage of the commercial sports world.

To cope with the pressure of generating commercial sports news in such an environment, newspaper organizations have developed and institutionalized a coverage strategy known as **beat reporting**. This is based on the assignment of a reporter(s) to a particular subject, such as sports, in order to cover it regularly. I call this a *macro beat*, that is, "sports" constitutes a macro beat. Once a macro beat is established, specific reporters are assigned to cover a specific organization on that beat in order to provide regular coverage of the subject. For example, a metropolitan daily newspaper assigns Smith to exclusively report on the *Bombers*, the city's National Hockey League franchise. In this sense, organizations on a macro beat which reporters are exclusively assigned to cover are "beats-within-a-beat," or *micro beats*. In the above example, Smith works the *Bombers* beat for his paper and is responsible for reporting on that team, not only throughout its playing season but during the off-season too. This type of reporting allows a newspaper to provide extensive and intensive coverage of a certain subject. Designation of a beat ensures continued coverage of a particular sports organization and its activities.

The *Examiner* depends heavily on the beat system to cover the local sports scene. Significantly, extensive coverage provided by the beat system is limited to the city's three major commercial sports teams. The local non-commercial sports scene is covered haphazardly by the *Examiner*. The paper does not have any sort of non-commercial sports beat where a reporter is assigned to provide full-time coverage (Roberts 1994; Burkley 1994). The non-commercial sports world is

instead covered by a system of **general assignment** reporting, whereby reporters who do not generate news from a beat are stationed in the newsroom and are assigned stories to research and write; they may also suggest a story idea to their editor and get clearance to cover it.

The *Examiner's* coverage of the local university and college sports scene, for example, is usually provided by Burkley (1994), a part-time reporter:

We don't have a beat for amateur sports, at least not like we do for the *Bombers* or *Flames*... I mostly cover university sports for the *Examiner*, you know, there isn't a full-timer who does it (Burkley 1994).

Sometimes beat reporters will be assigned to cover a non-commercial sports event, but only when they aren't occupied by their regular duties (Roberts 1994; Snead 1994). In short, little regard is given to non-commercial sports as worthwhile news subjects. Beat reporters, who are presumably a newspaper's best reporters (Roberts 1994; McDermott 1994), only cover non-commercial sports when they aren't busy covering a commercial sports event. The consideration given non-commercial sports by the *Examiner*, therefore, seems to be at best an intelligent indication of priorities, at worst little more than after-thought.

On the other hand, commercial spectator sports are highly regarded — indeed, coveted — by the paper. The *Examiner* has four beat reporters assigned to cover three different teams: two are assigned to the *Hornets* of the National Hockey League; one to the *Flames* of the Canadian Football League; and, one to the *Badgers*, the farm team for a major league baseball franchise. The beat reporter is responsible for providing exclusive coverage of their team all year long. During the playing season they cover training camp, practices and games. In the off-season, beat reporters also cover their team, speculating on trades, coaching

changes, movement with free agents, and who the team is going to pick in the amateur draft. As one beat reporter put it,

I spend so much time with these guys it's like I live with them. All year I go on their road trips, I cover all their home games, I go to most of their practices, I cover the amateur draft — **everything that happens with this team I know about it.** (Dewey 1994; emphasis added).

The beat system enables the *Examiner* to systematically cover the city's major commercial sports teams, providing extensive year-round coverage of their activities. Accordingly, this coverage strategy provides the paper with regular flows of commercial sports news. The practice of beat reporting insures that the interests of commercial sports organizations are always kept before the public (*cf.* McFarlane 1955).

The question is: why aren't amateur sports made the subject of a beat? After all, there are thousands of people who play amateur sports in *Alklemorb*, and they would probably want to read more about them. To answer this question, it is important to recall a point raised in Chapter 2: **only sports organizations deemed likely to produce important news of interest to contemporary sports news consumers are assigned beat reporters.**

Consistent with this philosophy, the offices of commercial sports leagues and individual teams constitute central nodes of news activity on the *Examiner's* sports beat. As noted earlier, the *Examiner* has three regular sports beats: the *Flames* of the CFL; the *Hornets* of the NHL; and, the *Badgers*, a Triple 'AAA' baseball club. Only these organizations are assigned beat reporters because of the significant investment of organizational resources it takes to establish and maintain a sports beat.

For example, the *Examiner's* sports editor notes that it costs the paper in excess of \$10,000 per year to provide beat coverage of the *Flames*, the local CFL franchise (Roberts 1994). As Roberts (1994) explains, over and above reporter salary, the paper has to pay for the beat reporter's transportation on road trips, hotels, and *per diem* money to cover the reporter's meals and incidentals on the road:

Magnify that several times and that's what it costs us to cover the *Hornets*, because their season's a lot longer than football, you know, so you're paying for more road trips, more hotels, meals, all that stuff.... It costs us a hell of a lot of money to maintain a beat (emphasis added).

The costs of sending a beat reporter on the road with their team are substantial. In the past, commercial sports organizations themselves covered these expenses (Smith 1976; Beddoes 1970; Surface 1972; McFarlane 1955). Today, however, commercial sports teams no longer pick up the tab; these expenses are billed directly to news organizations.

The *Hornets'* Director of Media Relations, Gaston Rouge (1994), was especially blunt when I asked him whether the news organization or the *Hornets* cover travelling expenses for beat reporters: "They pay their own way. We don't fund the media." As far as the *Hornets* are concerned,

It's up to them [news organizations] to cover travel expenses on the road. They can make their own travel arrangements or they can do it through us. Either way, they pay for their own airplane tickets, and to travel on our team bus we bill them \$8.00 a head (Rouge 1994; emphasis added).

This is also the case with the *Flames*, *Atklémorb's* Canadian Football League franchise. The team's Director of Communications explains: "We'll book them

hotel rooms and air fare at our preferred rate, you know, get them a good deal because we get discounts. But no way, we don't pay for it; that's their problem" (Jones 1994).

The same holds true for the pre-game catered meals the *Hornets* provide sports reporters,

It's a service we provide to them, but it's not a freebie.... [Reporters] have to pay five bucks if they want the meal. Of course, that's not enough to cover the entire catering bill, it's not even close... you know, it's still an out-of-pocket expense. But we don't pay for the whole thing. Well, the exception is for out-of-town media; as a courtesy, we don't charge visiting media for the meal (Rouge 1994; emphasis added).

Assigning a reporter to cover one commercial sports beat on a full-time basis is indeed a major commitment of organizational resources.

The *Examiner* commits these resources for the simple reason that its sports beats generate a steady flow of commercial sports news, the sort of news integral to producing a quality audience commodity. McDermott (1994), the *Examiner's* assistant sports editor, underscored this point when I asked him why the paper invests so heavily in establishing its sports beats.

Oh, our beats are indispensable. For example, we have Barnes covering the *Flames* two hundred days a year; so we've always got stuff on them. Even in the off-season he's always digging up *Flames* stuff... he's basically our full-time *Flames* reporter. That means he's responsible for everything that happens with them... it's his club and he's gotta maintain contact with them, be aware of every development, both major and minor....

You've gotta have beat reporters to do that, you know, to always know what's happening with a team. Beat guys have to follow their team at all times, because it's the only way they can stay on top of what's going on with them. And your readers want to know what's happening with [commercial sports], you know,

that's where the public's interest is. They want to know about professional sports. It's that simple (emphasis added).

Clearly, the *Examiner* depends on its sports beats to generate regular flows of commercial sports news. As far as the paper's sports newswriters are concerned, beats are fountains of sports information, information to be converted into sports news appealing to contemporary sports news consumers. This is why news organizations like the *Examiner* invest so heavily in establishing and maintaining sports beats.

Sports beats constitute a significant investment of organizational resources, both human and financial. Like any other business enterprise, the *Examiner* expects a significant return on its investment. In this case, the paper expects a steady supply of commercial sports news items to fill its sports section every day. And the obligation to generate this daily quantity of sports news falls squarely on the shoulders of the paper's sports reporters; this is especially true of beat reporters, given the resources the paper has invested in its sports beats.

At the *Examiner*, responsibility for covering a sports beat entails an obligation to write something every day about that beat. This is not negotiable, as the paper has far too much invested in its sports beats for them to sit idle. To this end, the *Examiner* expects quantities of fresh sports news to be generated from each of its sports beats every day. Roberts (1994) the sports editor, explains,

It costs us a hell of a lot of money to maintain a beat.... Oh yeah, you bet they'd better produce! We spend a lot of money to have these guys know what's going on with their team and to write about it.

I asked Snead (1994), a deskier with the paper, what would happen to a sports reporter who wasn't producing enough news items from his or her beat. His reply, though tongue-in-cheek, is telling: "He won't have his job for very long."

Clearly, responsibility for covering a sports beat clearly entails an obligation to write something every day about its activities. Indeed, the obligation to generate news from beats is so strong that reporters are expected to do so even if they don't think there is anything newsworthy to report. Snead (1994) explains,

There's always something to write about, whether it's the previous night's game, a trade rumour, maybe someone isn't playing well and they've been benched.... In the off-season it's not as bad [the pressure to produce news items every day] because there isn't as much happening day-in and day-out. But that doesn't mean a beat guy can let up, because we don't want to get beat on a story, ever! (emphasis added)

I asked Roberts (1994) about his sports reporters' obligations to generate copy from their beats every day,

There's always something for them to write about, even if it's a slow news day. Features are always good, like the rookie who's having a great season so far, or maybe one of the players has an interesting hobby or something like that... people like to read human interest stories. Whatever it is, they've got to write stories about their beat.

[But what if, say, Barnes tells you there's nothing going on with the *Flames* that day?]

Oh, he'll find something, he has too. Like I told you, that's what they're paid for -- writing stories about their team. Besides, between practices and games our guys spend so much time with their teams that they can't help but come up with something to write about (Roberts 1994; emphasis added).

McDermott (1994) the assistant sports editor, echoes the point made by Snead and Roberts, that beat reporters simply must generate fresh sports copy from their beats daily, regardless whether there is anything really newsworthy to report. He explains matter-of-factly,

Oh, there's always news, there's always something to write about. You know, it may be a slow news day, but they can contact their sources and dig something up. Sometimes what they come up with isn't that great, but it's still a story (McDermott 1994; emphasis added)

These comments from the *Examiner's* editorial staff underscore how the paper's coverage strategy — designed and implemented to capture a regular supply of commercial sports news material — puts a lot of pressure on its reporters to generate fresh sports news copy daily from their sports beats.

In effect, the *Examiner's* sports editors view each of the paper's sports beats as, to borrow from Fishman (1980: 35), a "bottomless pit where one can always find something to write about." And they expect their sports reporters to view their beats in the same way. When I asked Roberts (1994) what would happen if a beat reporter repeatedly failed to generate news from his or her beat, he bluntly replied, "He won't have a job for too long."

I questioned Burkley (1994), a sports reporter, about this obligation to generate news about the beat — anything — even on a slow news day when he feels there's just nothing worth writing about. In his view, "this is when you get the bullshit stories." He goes on to explain that,

every single day, beat reporters have to come up with something. Like, Buck has to come up with something on the *Hornets* every day of the season, and even in the off-season he's got to stay on top of everything that's happening with them, you know, trades and

stuff.... So you get a lot of player profile stories, stories about the big rivalry between the home team and their arch rivals coming up in a few days. Stuff like that you've got to make a big deal about when it's slow on your beat.... **There's a lot of pressure to write stories, even if nothing is really going on. To me, that's bullshit** (emphasis added).

Lack of activity on a sports beat is thus insufficient grounds for a reporter not to generate any news. As Fishman (1980: 35) notes, "The sense of how little or how much is happening is largely irrelevant to the normative requirement for reporters to produce these stories." In short, the journalistic axiom "no news is news" appears to be a convention of news reporting at the *Examiner*, and likely at all metropolitan daily newspapers utilizing the beat system of reporting. As the empirical evidence clearly shows, there is always something on the beat to write about, even if it's "bullshit."

In short, the whole point of the reporter's beat work is to generate news items to fill the *Examiner's* sports section. Responsibility for covering a beat carries with it the obligation to write something every day about that beat — this is not negotiable. It is clear that sports reporters must generate a quantum of fresh sports copy from their news beats daily. Just how many news items they must produce is "variable." This depends primarily on the amount of space — the size of the sports *news hole* — they have to fill.

The size of the *Examiner's* sports section varies daily, and is worked out in the early afternoon when the paper's various beat editors (business, sports, entertainment, city, etc.), meet with senior editorial staff. The news hole assigned to each beat is largely determined by the amount of advertising the paper has that day. Explains McDermott (1994),

Newspapers are very much a business, very much. **The amount of space we have each day is *solely* dictated by the amount of advertising we have.** The advertising has to remain at a certain level to pay all the bills, so therefore if there's a lot of advertising the paper gets bigger and there's a lot more space for sports (emphasis added).

The amount of advertising thus determines the amount of space for the sports section. As Roberts (1994) puts it, "news space is driven by ad revenue." Snead (1994) explains the importance of advertising this way,

The size of the sports section varies every day; **It all depends on advertising — that's what everything in the paper depends on.** The number of ads you sell determines how big the paper will be; you can't have a one hundred page paper with only three ads in it because you're going to lose a lot of money real fast.... **Ads determine news space — it's the key.** Our advertising people often joke they take care of my pay cheque and, really, that's more or less the case (emphasis added).

When I was conducting this particular interview with Snead, it is interesting to note we were interrupted by a phone call from Dewey, the paper's *Badgers* beat reporter. He was calling from Scranton, Ohio, just before the *Badgers'* game that evening, to ask how long his story had to be. Snead (1994) told him, "I wouldn't write nine inches or anything like that. We've only got four pages today." I questioned Snead (1994) about this and he explained that because it was a Monday,

there isn't a lot of advertising, so we don't have much space. A lot of it has to do with the fact that advertisers don't want to spend money advertising on days when readership might be down. You'll notice that most papers are bigger later in the week because everything is geared for the weekend shopper, you know, people get paid on Thursday, for instance, so they've got money to spend

and that's when advertisers want to reach them by placing ads in the paper.

Advertising, therefore, determines not only the *content* of sports news — there is a commercial spectator sports bias in the *Examiner's* sports section because this is perceived to be the sort of sports news that enables the newspaper to build a "quality" audience commodity. But advertising concerns also clearly influence the *amount* of news content in each edition of the *Examiner* — the more advertising space purchased, the more space there is for commercial sports news. Thus, advertising is a major determinant of sports news content in the *Examiner*.

To compound the pressure of having to generate varying quantities of news from their beats every day, *Examiner* sports reporters must do so under constraints imposed on them by the news organization. Specifically, sports reporters must generate news items under inflexible deadlines not of their choosing and beyond their control.

Beat reporters must schedule their information gathering routines and writing around the daily production schedule of the news organization. At the *Examiner*, all copy is to be submitted to the sports desk no later than 11:00 pm. As McDermott (1994) explains,

We have to have the first edition cleared and off the floor, ready to go to press by 11:15 pm. "Off the floor" means all the pages [of the sports section] have to be laid out, and camera-ready, ready to be shot by the camera which turns it into news print.... All this has to be done by 11:15 or so in order to get the first edition done. It's the first edition of the paper which serves the outlying areas, Kingston and Cornwall. The final edition has to be done for 1:00 am and that's for Ottawa. So they've got to get their stories in by 11:00 pm — no later.

I asked McDermott what happens if sports reporters don't have their stories ready in time? He replied emphatically,

They have to! It's not an option. And believe me, they'll hear about it when they don't meet a deadline. We've got two editions a night, and if they don't meet the first one, they'd bloody well better have the story ready for the second! I mean, if they miss the first edition, they miss half the readership (emphasis added).

News items must be in on time because each has to be proofread by editors, cut where they need to be cut if too long, and then have a headline put on them before they are ready to go to press. It is imperative for reporters to file stories on time, since each stage of production depends upon completion of an earlier stage.

That the obligation to meet deadlines is a *normative requirement* of sports newswork is evidenced by the fact that almost everyone I interviewed seemed surprised, shocked even, that I asked if deadlines are rigidly enforced. An assistant editor called it one of the "Golden Rules" of sports journalism, "You meet the deadline" (Snead 1994). To this end, no matter where reporters are or what they are doing on their beat, the *Examiner's* fixed deadlines require reporters to strategically and efficiently allocate their time and arrange their schedules so they can have news items submitted on time. This is especially problematic for those who are covering a night game that may not end, literally, until minutes before deadline (or on occasion, after deadline).

This was explained to me by Dewey (1994), who works the paper's *Badgers* beat,

Here at the *Examiner* the [deadline is] 11:00 pm which is kind of tough to meet if you're out in the field and you're covering a baseball game. Usually what happens is, uh, especially last year, the first year for the *Badgers*, the games didn't start until 7:30 pm so

they were getting over ten to fifteen minutes before deadline. So what you have to do to get your story done by 11:00 pm is write a "running copy" of the story.... Running copy is just basic "who did what," almost like a CP [Canadian Press] kind of story. I try to get a fancy lead so it doesn't look like CP and I write some CP-style copy — not that CP copy is bad — just to fill the space and then after the game I'll get a few quotes from the players and send the story off. I cut it pretty close sometimes.

I asked Dewey what he does, if anything, if he can't meet the deadline? He looked at me incredulously and exclaimed,

You've got to! You've got to meet the deadline. If you don't meet the deadline then you won't have a job tomorrow.... It's not so bad this year because they've [the *Badgers*] moved the games up half an hour, so I get a little bit of leeway now. So now I can go down to the clubhouse and talk to the players and actually kind of think about what I get to write, so I can usually get that done before the deadline (emphasis added).

This underscores the tremendous pressure under which sports newswork is performed. Reporters are expected to generate predictable quantities of news from their beats every day, under the constraints of fixed deadlines that impose an arbitrary cut-off to newsgathering. When I asked reporters how they managed to cope with these demands, the universal response was the need to have an extensive network of reliable sources on the beat. As one sports reporter put it, "Sources are your lifeblood. Without them you're dead" (Colvin 1994).

Recall that in casting the news net, newswriters seek connections with subjects that are both deemed newsworthy and able to provide reliable and accessible flows of news material (Ericson *et al* 1987, 1989; Chomsky and Herman 1988; Fishman 1980; Tuchman 1978). Due to the size of the investment of organizational resources a beat represents, only organizations deemed likely to

produce news of broad general interest are assigned beat reporters (Tuchman 1978). In the case of sports news, because of their status as preeminent organizations in the sports world, major commercial spectator sports organizations are invariably assigned beat reporters. As a result, these organizations constitute central nodes of information and, thus, become routine sources of sports news.

In a nutshell, commercial sports organizations are sources of the kind of sports news that the news industry believes the public wants to consume. Therefore, news organizations go to great lengths to secure a steady and accessible flow of this news by establishing beats to cover the activities of the major commercial spectator sports entities. This is why the *Examiner* provides extensive coverage of the *Hornets*, the *Badgers* and the *Flames* by a system of beat reporting. Colvin (1994), a sports beat reporter for the paper, explains that,

People want to read about professional sports, the big leagues, you know.... A lot of people don't watch little Billy go play ball at Trillium Park on a Friday night, I mean, how much interest is there in amateur sports like that? Not enough to warrant a lot of coverage (Colvin 1994).

The *Examiner* gives so much news space to the activities of commercial sports because it is perceived that this is what the public wants. The more commercial sports news, the bigger the audience the paper will attract and subsequently sell to advertisers. Thus, as pointed out in the first chapter, economics is a major determinant of which sports receive coverage in an advertising-driven metropolitan daily newspaper.

Whether or not this is an accurate perception of the public interest is of little concern to this study. I am accepting this philosophy at face value, and attempting to construct an alternative explanation for the saturation of the sports

pages with news of commercial sports — one which does not rest solely on economic reductionism. It is not surprising that economics is central to the equation: this was predicted by the model developed in Chapter 2 and, as the empirical materials show, the model holds up. I argue that a more robust account for the presence of so much news about commercial sports at the expense of non-commercial sports is offered by examining the work routines of sports reporters in conjunction with the economics argument.

To this end, I suggested earlier in Chapter 1 that another explanation for why commercial sports organizations are almost exclusively routine sources of sports news *is because of their ability to facilitate sports newswork by producing a constant supply of information, the raw material of news*. This is what establishes commercial sports organizations as routine sources on the sports beat, thereby securing for them the "lion's share" of column space in the daily press.

The administrative offices of commercial sports organizations generate a steady stream of information, such as game statistics, media guides, player profiles, status reports on players' health, impending player trades and so on. The advantage to sports reporters is that an abundance of potentially newsworthy material is centralized in a few locations, thereby facilitating newsgathering and making it easier for them to meet writing deadlines each day.

To get a better idea of why it is so important for beat reporters to have routine sources, and how such an arrangement helps to make their job more manageable, I asked Colvin (1994), who works the *Hornets* beat, to take me through a typical work day during the NHL season.

Colvin usually starts his work day around 9:00 am. The first thing he does is call his sources to "see if anything's going on," hoping to get some story ideas from them. As he puts it,

I'm always looking to see if they've heard any rumours, because that's how you get your best stories — someone on your beat hears something, they tell you and then you follow it up, see if there's anything to it (Colvin 1994).

Once he has completed this initial round of telephone calls, he calls the media relations director for the *Hornets*, Gaston Rouge. Again, he is looking to find out if anything important has happened with the team since his contact the day before,

Like, they may have been talking trade with another team the night before, or maybe someone isn't going on the road trip... anything that'll make a good story, you know. This is the sort of stuff I'll get from Rouge (Colvin 1994).

Ideally, Colvin is looking for two types of news: stories and briefs. *Sports stories* tend to be longer items, such as feature-length stories on star athletes, and are usually located in the first couple of pages of the sports section. *Sports briefs*, on the other hand, are very short items, "you know, small items, tidbits, like Joe Blow hurt his toe in practice last night and is a doubtful starter for tonight's game" (Colvin 1994).

After completing this initial coverage work, that is, getting in touch with his sources to familiarize himself with the beat — "I get an idea of what kind of a news day it's going to be" — Colvin heads off to the *Hornets* practice facility at around 11:00 am. Typically, on-ice practice ends at 12:30 pm, at which time the players head to the gym to continue their workout; "that's when I start to really dig for something." Colvin meets with the *Hornets'* coaches while the players are in the gym, following up on any rumours he's heard or hunches he may have;

I'll be talking to Adams [the head coach] and tell him, "Look, I heard Williams was on the trading block, what's going on with that?" Or maybe Meyerowitz didn't get much playing time in last night's game, I'll ask Adams or one of his assistants [assistant

coaches] if he's been benched or what.... I'm basically trying to get some stories from them, you know (Colvin 1994; emphasis added).

After meeting with the coaching staff, Colvin waits in the locker room for the players to return, usually at around 1:00 pm. For the next hour or so, Colvin "hangs out" with the players, talking to different guys, always looking for a potential news item,

If I'm working on a feature that day, I do my interview for that feature; so if I'm doing a feature on, say, Anton Smith, from 1 'til 2 o'clock I'll talk to him. But on most days I'll try to talk to at least four or five players....

I asked Colvin what sort of information he is looking for from the players?

I'm always asking players about rumours. You always gotta go to the players, because the players always know what's going on. They always act like they don't know what's going on, but they always know what's happening (emphasis added).

Colvin's activities constitute what Fishman (1980: 37-44) calls a "beat round", that is, the daily round of routine activities a reporter follows to provide basic coverage of their beat. Colvin follows this routine of activities on an almost daily basis throughout the *Hornets'* season, making highly regular, carefully scheduled rounds of the same people at the same location

After he has completed his daily round of activities with the *Hornets*, Colvin goes to lunch and then arrives at the *Examiner's* newsroom at around 3 00 pm, when he begins to make more phone calls to his sources. Throughout the day, Colvin is constantly in contact with people who may be able to supply him with potentially newsworthy information about his beat. Typically, this is information

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he is not able to gather on his own because, as I noted at the outset of this chapter, it is financially impossible to do so. Colvin (1994) explains,

The *Examiner* obviously can't afford to fly me all over the continent, you know, to every NHL city to write stories about the *Hornets*.... So I always stay in contact with sportswriters in other cities because they've always got something I can use. Like if the Pittsburgh *Penguins* are coming into town for a game tomorrow, I may phone Pittsburgh just to, uh, say if a guy is listed as day-to-day, I'll ask the *Penguins'* beat writer what the guy's injury status is, you know, that's good information because I can work it into a story. Or, I'll ask what's going on with Mario Lemieux and how he's been doing....

I always, always, ask whether they've [other sportswriters] heard any good rumours, you know? I mean, we love rumours, so the big thing here is to get the rumours; they make for good stories (emphasis added).

Obviously, Colvin spends a great deal of his work day on the telephone; in a sense, it's his life-line to his beat.

Colvin (1994) indicated that in a typical day he'll easily make upwards of twenty to thirty phone calls. I asked him why he makes so many phone calls, if it is really necessary to spend that much of his work day on the phone?

Oh yeah! I have to do this to know what's happening on my beat, you know, to stay on top of things. If I don't, then I'll get beat on a story, and like I told you, that's my greatest fear.... For me, meeting deadlines isn't the biggest pressure of my job. The biggest pressure is beating the competition, making sure that you're first.... I mean, I can meet deadlines. To me, it's bigger to have the story first and the only way you're gonna do that consistently is to have good sources and stay in touch with them (emphasis added).

Colvin usually wraps up this newsgathering component of his day around 5:30 pm or 6:00 pm with yet another telephone call to the *Hornets* media relations people, "just to see if there's anything else up." Then he'll set to work on writing his news

items, or complete those he has been working on over the course of the day. Otherwise, if he has to cover a *Hornets* game that night, Colvin will head down to the arena an hour or two before game time and spend the next several hours there, covering the game and producing at least one news item for the 11:00 pm deadline.

The most important thing to note about Colvin's beat round is that it allowed him to complete a lot of his basic coverage work, that is newsgathering, in one centralized location. On this particular day, the *Hornets* practice facility was the source of much of Colvin's news material. Having accessible sports news material centralized in one or two locations makes it much easier for reporters to meet their deadlines. Notice Colvin only had to physically be at only one place to accomplish much of his basic coverage of the beat; the rest of his newsgathering was accomplished over the telephone from his home in the morning and from his desk at the *Examiner* in the late afternoon.

This "idealization" (Garfinkel 1967; cf. Fishman 1980) of Colvin's beat round shows how vital it is for beat reporters to have a network of sources and to constantly stay in touch with them. As Colvin (1994) suggests, without sources sports reporters wouldn't be able to do their work. This is the case with Colvin and his *Hornets* beat,

Oh yeah, absolutely I need my sources. There's one guy on the *Hornets* that I talk to every day during the season; there's a couple I talk to at least three times a week; there's others I talk to once every two weeks.... I'm looking to see if they've heard any rumours, you know, who the *Hornets* might be signing, whether they've heard if the *Hornets* are after a player from another team. You see, I get this kind of information from players because players talk to agents and agents talk to scouts, uh, there's three or four NHL scouts I talk to every day. I also talk to some other people in the [*Hornets*] organization every day to find out what's going on.

[So your sources are important to your work?]

Invaluable! You can't do this job unless you've got good sources.

In a nutshell, having a supply of sources on which they can routinely rely for information is a must for reporters on the *Examiner's* sports beats if they are to cope with the pressures of sports newswork.

Without the large amount of information provided by their sources, sports reporters would not be able to generate the quantities of fresh news from their beat the *Examiner* demands of them. Moreover, having these sources centralized in some fashion — such as in a practice facility or by telephone, as we saw with Colvin's beat round — goes a long way towards helping reporters cope with the pressures under which sports newswork is performed, namely, having to produce expectable quantities of fresh news under impending deadlines. Quite simply, sports newswork is more manageable when information sources are centralized, largely because centralization cuts down on travel time, leaving more time for newsgathering and writing; therefore making it easier to cover a beat and ultimately to satisfy the expectations of the reporter's news organization.

Having examined the importance of routine sources to sports newswriters, I now want to return to a point raised in the previous chapter, namely, that commercial sports receive so much coverage in the daily press because of their ability to facilitate sports newswork by providing reporters with generally reliable and accessible flows of sports news material.

The offices of the commercial sports leagues, organizations, and teams are well equipped to offer services and materials to facilitate sports newswork. In particular, they have in-house *media relations units*, whose purpose is to meet the information needs of newsworkers, to provide them with the raw materials of sports news. As the Director of Media Relations for the *Hornets* told me,

I would characterize my job as being a **facilitator**, a manager of information. It's all about the dissemination of information. From our end point of view, as a professional sports organization, it's a matter of, uh, how to best disseminate your information in order to, uh, well, let's be fair: **you have to maximize the coverage of your team, and the best way to do that is help the journalists do their job.... Basically, I'm here to help them do their jobs** (Rouge 1994; emphasis added).

Jones (1994), the *Flames'* Director of Communications, articulated his role as the team's Director of Communications in a similar fashion:

In a sense, we have a 50/50 relationship with the media — we can't survive without them and their coverage to the fan. On the other hand, they have a duty to cover us for the fans, so it's a good relationship. **So my job is to facilitate theirs, to make sure they have everything available to them.... I'm like a quarterback, you know, my job is to disseminate ideas and to get our word out to reporters, and to make our personnel accessible in order to make their job easier** (emphasis added).

Both media relations staffers characterized the purpose of media relations as facilitating newswork, making it as easy as possible for sports reporters to do their work. They do this not out of the goodness of their hearts, but rather to serve their own interests — to obtain publicity for their teams in the form of sports news.

A point of common ground among all of the media relations staffers (MRS) interviewed is the insistence that the key to facilitating newswork, and thus obtaining a lot of coverage in the daily press, is for commercial sports organizations to staff their media relations units with people who have an in-depth knowledge of the sports journalism craft. That is, people who understand what sports newswork is all about, people who know what constitutes a newsworthy event; what the pressures and constraints of newswork are in terms of story quotas and deadlines; when to hold a press conference; what information to put in a press release; and, what facilities newsworkers need to cover an event, such as electrical outlets, television monitors, telephones and so on. In other words, it is important for MRS's to understand media logic and media formats (Altheide 1985) if they are to successfully facilitate sports newswork. As Jones (1994) puts it,

You've got to know as much about them [reporters] as you can, you know, what their job is all about and how they do it. That's the key to doing media relations.

Armed with such *recipe knowledge* (Ericson *et al* 1989; *cf.* McFarlane 1955), MRS's are able to facilitate sports newswork much more effectively.

For Rouge's (1994) views on this last point, I asked him how beneficial it is to have experience in journalism, to understand how media relations works in the commercial sports industry?

It helps if you've been on "the other side of the fence," because you understand how they [newsworkers] work, how they like their information *packaged*.... By "packaged" I mean how reporters like their news releases printed, when they want press conferences scheduled... Really, it's all about knowing how to make a big deal out of something that isn't, how to target an event specifically for television as opposed to radio or print.... **It's important to know what sports journalists want, and this is where my background in journalism and PR helps (emphasis added).**

What Rouge suggests is, that for MRS's to facilitate sports newswork, it is not important they have a formal background in journalism or a similar field of mass communications. What *does* matter is they understand exactly what sports reporters need to do their work. These findings are consistent with McFarlane (1955).

In the same vein, Jones (1994) argues that media relations people don't need a journalism degree to do this work. In his view, media relations is "more of an *operations* thing." I asked him to explain what he meant by "operations,"

Well, literally, I mean knowing how sports journalists operate, how they do their job, what they need to do it. **The more you know about them, then the better able you are to facilitate their work.** Like, I've gotta know the deadlines all the different media guys work under because they're all different, you know, beat reporters from the papers run on a totally different schedule from the TV guys. If you know this — you have to know this — you know when to have your press conferences, you know what facilities they need in the press box or whatever.... It's my job to know what they need to do their job (emphasis added).

Likewise, Dawne (1994), a media relations staffer with the *Hornets*, and Snead (1994), a desk/columnist with the *Examiner*, both point to the importance of having knowledge of sports newswork in order to facilitate it,

Oh yeah, as a media relations person it's a real advantage [to understand newswork], like, for example, **you know what kind of information to put in a press release** (Dawne 1994; emphasis added).

I know people who've left reporting to get into PR work. And I think organizations that hire ex-reporters to do their PR are really smart, because **they know exactly what reporters want.** Like Tennis Canada has a guy that used to work for Canadian Press, he

covered the *Blue Jays*. He knows what is newsworthy, what we need to write a story (Snead 1994; emphasis added).

These interview comments underscore the point that successfully facilitating sports newswork requires a thorough understanding of newswork routines.

Media relations staffers must also be aware of the extent to which sports newswork is controlled by inflexible deadlines, and thus orient much of their MR activities to correspond with these. Press conferences, for example, are scheduled to correspond to news organization deadlines:

Try calling, for example, Dirk Smith at CJPT at 5:00 and telling him we're having a news conference at 5:30 on an important topic. He'd be screaming "What the hell were you thinking! You're calling me now, my run up of stories for the night is already done, you're breaking this huge story at 5:30 and I'm on the air in an hour-and-a-half!" You see, that's why you've got to know how the media people work (Rouge 1994; emphasis added).

This notion, that media relations staffers must be aware of the temporal constraints of sports newswork, is expanded on at some length by Jones (1994):

It's important to time news conferences according to the, uh, schedules of all your media guys. You know, you can't have a conference at 5:30 pm because the TV guys can't come, and the press guys, they want it in the early afternoon so they can contact their sources, maybe get an inside angle on the story or something like that....

So I'm aware of their deadlines, you know, the different newspapers, TV, radio, all that — I have to be. You're never more aware of deadlines than post-game. After a *Flames* game, for example, we have fifteen minutes to keep the locker room closed but after that we open it to the media so they can go in and talk to the coach, talk to the players, you know, do their interviews and stuff like that. Your beat guys, like from the *Examiner* and the *Observer*, they have to file their stories by, say, 11 o'clock I think, and they have to get their quotes. So my job is to make sure

everyone can get in and get their stuff and get out as quick as possible. And they're pretty bitter if they can't do it because they get heat from their sports editor if they don't get their stories in on time (emphasis added) (emphasis added).

Notice, that in order to facilitate sports newswork after the game, to make sure reporters "get their quotes" so they can "get their stories in on time," Jones had to know the organizational deadlines the reporters work under.

Thus facilitating newswork as a means of obtaining press coverage requires that media relations staffers understand all facets of sports newswork, from concerns surrounding newsgathering and what constitutes a newsworthy item, to an awareness of the temporal constraints which affect and ultimately control sports newswork.

The *Examiner* cannot possibly provide coverage of the myriad events taking place in the sports world every day. Not only is it humanly impossible to do so, but financially as well; it would cost far too much to maintain a reporting staff large enough to provide blanket coverage of the sports world. Clearly, then, economics largely determine the paper's coverage strategy.

The *Examiner's* coverage strategy is based on a system of beat reporting, whereby a reporter is assigned to provide exclusive coverage of a particular subject on the sports beat. These subjects are invariably major commercial sports organizations. The *Flames*, *Hornets* and *Badgers* constitute the *Examiner's* three sports beats. This strategy enables the paper to systematically cover *Alklemorb's* commercial sports teams, providing year-round coverage of their activities. More

importantly, however, the beat strategy is a way of providing reporters with predictably available sports news material.

From the *Examiner's* perspective, this is important; the prevailing philosophy in the news industry is that people want to read about commercial sports. Providing extensive coverage of commercial sports, especially the local teams, thus enables the *Examiner* to attract a larger readership. Newspapers are big businesses which exist to make a profit by selling a commodity: theirs is a readership demographic — an audience commodity. Businesses who find the *Examiner's* demographic appealing purchase advertising space to sell their own particular commodity to readers. In a nutshell, coverage of commercial sports generates revenue for the *Examiner* and the more news space the paper devotes to coverage of these sports, the more advertising revenue it is likely to generate.

Since this coverage strategy requires that reporters focus on major commercial sports organizations, it severely limits the range of content of the *Examiner's* sports news. Non-commercial sports are not captured in the *Examiner's* news net because they are not perceived to generate sports news of general interest to a broad base of sports news consumers. They are not assigned a beat reporter because non-commercial sports lack revenue generating potential. As a consequence, non-commercial sports receive only a modicum of coverage. Thus, there is an inordinate amount of coverage in the *Examiner* of major commercial sports' activities — they're "cash cows" for the paper, so to speak.

Establishing and maintaining a sports beat constitutes a significant investment of the *Examiner's* human and financial resources. Not only does it cost the paper a lot of money to send a reporter on the road to cover a team throughout its playing season, but this also means the reporter is mostly unavailable to cover other sporting events. In effect, the *Examiner* has a huge investment in covering

major commercial sports, especially the local scene. The paper therefore wants a return on this investment; this takes the form of sports news, news about commercial spectator sports — news that sells.

In light of this, the *Examiner* expects its reporters to generate varying quantities of fresh news from their sports beats every day; exact amounts depend on the size of the sports news hole that has to be filled. This obligation is to be met regardless of whether the reporter feels there is anything newsworthy to write about. Responsibility for covering a sports beat entails an obligation to write something about that beat daily: this is not negotiable. And not only are reporters under pressure to generate expectable quantities of fresh news from their beats every day, but they must do so under the constraints of fixed deadlines not of their choosing and beyond their control. News items must be submitted no later than the paper's 11:00 pm deadline; although reporters are expected to submit them as early as possible to allow for editing and other preparatory work before items are camera-ready, that is, ready to go to press. This poses a problem for the *Examiner's* beat reporters because their teams play mostly in the late evening, and these games often finish up only a half-hour or so before deadline. Reporters are under a great deal of pressure to complete their interviews with the players and coaches after the game, and then write their item in a very short period of time. In short, sports newswork at the *Examiner* is performed in an environment rife with pressures and constraints.

In this chapter we saw that the *Examiner* is an advertising-driven commercial enterprise that sells its readership as a commodity — an 'audience commodity' — to other businesses (advertisers). It is through the sale of advertising space that

the paper generates the bulk of its revenue. To attract the predominantly male readership that constitutes a "quality" audience commodity, the paper provides extensive coverage of the activities of commercial spectator sports. The prevailing philosophy in the news industry is that commercial sports news "delivers the male" (Sparks 1992). Thus, the *Examiner* needs a steady flow of commercial sports news to fill its sports pages daily, and its sports newswriters devote most of their time to generating this.

At the same time the *Examiner* demands commercial sports news, commercial sports organizations desire regular and extensive media coverage of their activities. As a commodified form of entertainment, commercial sports depend on media coverage of their activities for their continued existence and prosperity. To this end, commercial sports organizations go to great lengths to facilitate sports newswriting in an effort to obtain this coverage. In effect, they make it easier for the *Examiner's* sports newswriters to do their jobs.

The *Examiner* and its sports reporters are thus drawn into a symbiotic relationship with commercial sports organizations by reciprocity of interest and economic necessity. The newspaper needs a steady flow of commercial sports news to build a "quality" audience commodity, and commercial sports need regular and extensive newspaper coverage to promote their activities. The implication of this state of affairs for news content in the paper's sports pages is significant: the *Examiner* depends on commercial sports organizations to supply its sports newswriters with the bulk of the sports news to be reported in the paper every day. As a result, there is a distinct commercial sports bias in the *Examiner's* sports news content. Accordingly, non-commercial sports, because they are perceived to lack any significant revenue-generating potential — they are not considered to be

of widespread appeal to contemporary sports news consumers — receive only a modicum of coverage in the *Examiner*.

In sum, commercial spectator sports organizations facilitate newswork, they make it easier for sports reporters in particular to do their work. They do this to obtain for themselves regular and extensive press coverage of their activities. *How* commercial sports organizations go about facilitating sports newswork, and the ultimate impact on sports news content in the *Examiner's* sports pages is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Sports Reporter and Source Relations

We're not in this business to establish friendships with sources. We're in it to establish relationships.

—Snead (1994)

In the preceding chapter, we saw that commercial sports organizations facilitate newswork in order to obtain for themselves regular and extensive media coverage of their activities. This chapter examines the specific means by which commercial sports organizations do this. The question that directed my field research on this matter was this: what is it that commercial sports organizations do to facilitate newswork; how do they help reporters in particular cope with a pressure-filled sports newswork environment?

The most important way commercial sports organizations facilitate newswork, as discussed in Chapter 4, is by providing sports reporters with a steady stream of information concerning their activities. There are two channels through which the *Examiner's* sports reporters get this information: press releases

and news conferences; and, a network of personal contacts they cultivate on their beats.

The *press release*, as noted in chapter 2, is a simple mechanism that enables sports organizations to issue statements of current or upcoming events to newswriters. These "knowledge packages" (Ericson *et al* 1989) typically contain a detailed account of an event, including background information, primary facts and, sometimes, "quotable quotes" from people involved. According to Rouge (1994), in a press release,

You basically answer all the questions — who, what, where, when, how. And you don't have to be a great writer, as long as you can give them [reporters] the basic information so they can determine, "Okay, is there a story here, yes or no? If yes, what is it and how will I treat it as a reporter?"

As Burkley (1994) puts it, press releases "give you pretty much all you need in terms of the background you need to write a story." Snead (1994) concurs, explaining that press releases are so important to doing sports newswork because,

they have all the background information... [biographies] on the athletes, their stats, stuff like that. It means we have this information at our fingertips and, say you're doing an interview with an athlete, you don't have to waste time asking them background stuff because you already have it; a guy like Kurt Browning [former Canadian figure skating champion] doesn't want to answer that kind of stuff.

From the reporter's perspective, press releases are especially useful for covering commercial sports.

Public relations people help a lot. Like, the *Hornets* might provide you with stuff on Dinkov [their rookie sensation], you know, he's scored a goal in his last ten straight games; that's information right there that's very useful. **You get a lot of this kind of information from press releases** (Dewey 1994; emphasis added).

Dewey (1994) pointed out in the same conversation that releases are also useful for covering non-commercial sports:¹³

Press releases help with some things we don't cover that often... say the Canadian Broomball Association gives us a release saying that some guy has been named to the North American All-Star team and he's from the local area. Well, no one's gonna be covering that as part of any beat, so it's good to know that kind of thing, you know, it's good to get a press release on it. It's the kind of story that might provide for an interesting little side bar or a small feature or something like that (emphasis added).

Essentially press releases offer story material to reporters, making them aware of potentially newsworthy events.

I asked the *Hornets'* Director of Media Relations to comment on this last point (Rouge 1994). He clearly points out that his job is to offer story ideas to reporters, and to provide them with the material they need to produce a news item,

No, I don't go around and say, this is what's important. **They know what's important and I know what they think is important.** I'm here to help them do their jobs. It's simply having to know what they want to know. For example, today we signed Timmy Horton. First thing I did was prepare a complete news release on everything he's done and as soon as that was done we sent it out to the media. **Now it's up to them to decide if they want to cover that story** (emphasis added).

¹³ That is, those non-commercial sports organizations fortunate enough to have the resources to issue them.

This is particularly helpful to a reporter who encounters a slow news day on their beat. Recall that reporters are obligated to generate fresh sports news from their beats every day, regardless of whether they feel anything newsworthy has really happened. They depend on media relations people to regularly supply them with story material,

Like I told you earlier, I'll send out a press release to [sports newswriters] and it's their decision to cover it. **All I can do is let them know about something....** Remember, I don't write for the *Examiner*. I let them know about something and they'll decide, "Is there a story in there." If yes, they determine if there's space to run it. So they go through a checklist: Is this worth it? Do we have the space? What else is going on? Is it worth my [reporter's] time, can I physically get there in time, come back, and write the story before deadline? So this checklist, it comes from the media and they go through it and they will make their decision. **I'm just basically pitching ideas and stories at them (Rouge 1994).**

Thus, it is a real benefit for reporters to have media relations people "pitching ideas and stories" at them, especially on a slow news day.

Another example of how sports newswork is facilitated by press releases is offered by Jones (1994), Director of Communications for the *Flames*,

A little while ago a lot of our staff and a few of the players went out door-to-door for the Salvation Army and we raised \$4,000. I thought that was a newsworthy piece. I put out a press release on it because I thought it was good to show people we were out in the community doing stuff. It didn't get picked up by anyone. But it depends, if it's a big news day and there's a lot of other stories in the newspaper, it happens — the story won't get picked up. **But if it's a slow news day, it'll probably get picked up (emphasis added).**

The press release is thus an important device through which media relations people offer news material to reporters, in effect helping them do their work. Whether

reporters choose to follow-up on the potential news item is a different matter. Nonetheless, they have had a potentially newsworthy event brought to their attention. This is particularly useful on slow news days when a reporter may be scrambling to come up with story ideas.

At this point, it is important to address an issue brought up in the previous chapter: that it is common practice for press releases to find their way into the sports pages as *bona fide* news items. That is, they are presented as the result of a reporter's legitimate newsgathering and writing efforts, when in fact they are simply press releases that have been re-written. This is a key finding of McFarlane's (1955) pioneering study of sports promotion (*cf.* Smith 1976; Beddoes 1970). The newswriters I interviewed vehemently denied this sort of thing occurred at the *Examiner*, or at any other paper they were aware of. One reporter told me, "Press releases don't get printed verbatim, no way, never. I try not to use quotes from them, either" (Burkley 1994). Another reporter was more direct on this issue. Colvin (1994) argued that sports reporters "get a lot of good information from some releases, but you never write them up as a story — never!" I asked him to explain the reason for this; why, if there is so much useful information in a press release, reporters hesitate to rewrite them.

Well, press releases are good for background stuff, like stats and that sort of thing. But I never use a quote from them because they're generally **made up** by the PR guy, and just read by the general manager or whoever the quote is attributed to, and he'll just say "fine, use it." Plus, if we did use them, everybody would have the same quotes and, uh, really, you want your own stuff.... Besides, press releases never answer the questions, so you've always got to phone them up and ask questions, check your sources

to see what their take on it is.... **When it comes down to it, I just don't trust [press releases].**

Assertions that reporters do not simply re-write press releases as *bona fide* news items are corroborated by Rouge (1994), the *Hornets'* Director of Media Relations. I asked him if any of his press releases appear in the paper, reprinted as a news item,

Well it happens for the little stuff, you know, we sign a kid from the minors and we have to put a good quote down from Burns [the *Hornets'* General Manager], who is in Italy and a quote from the kid we signed. So, I'll write a release that says, the *Hornets* today signed so-and-so and this is what Burns says and this kid basically is really happy to be with us. **But you're not going to have a major article, written by me and sent on official letterhead, published in the paper — that would never happen (emphasis added).**

It would be instructive to conduct further research on this matter. For example, obtaining a number of press releases and comparing them to the corresponding news items published in the *Examiner* over a period of time (essentially a content analysis) could provide valuable insight into the extent to which newswriters simply re-write releases as news items.

The most important thing about press releases, from the reporter's perspective, is that they provide a great deal of useful information, making it easier to generate fresh sports copy every day. This is especially the case on slow news days when little of significance is happening but something has to be written. The avalanche of press releases that bury the *Examiner's* sports desk daily offers a gold mine of potential news items.

Press conferences are prescheduled news events which have a function similar to press releases: they provide reporters with a wealth of sports news material. What is unique about them is that conferences almost invariably constitute a significant news event, unlike releases which are often useless. "Maybe ten percent of the press releases we get are followed up on" (Snead 1994). Rouge (1994) explains the primary reason for the *prima facie* news-value of conferences lies in the fact that they're held only to announce a significant event,

We won't have a press conference unless there's something absolutely new and it looks like there's a lot of questions that are likely to be asked about it; but it would have to be about some new program or logo or major player signing. You know, if we sign a new player and the player isn't in town, why have a news conference? But if he's in town and he's a big name, then for sure we'll call a conference.

Jones (1994) also stresses the status of press conferences as major news events,

If we draft or trade for a player named John Smith and we think he's going to be a big player for us, and we just put out a press release, it's not going to be as big a deal as if we have a press conference -- they [sports newswriters] pay more attention to us when we hold a conference. If we have a major media conference, with everybody down there, then that's a major news story and this guy is all of a sudden something special and the media wants to know why (emphasis added).

As Jones (1994) implies, press releases don't command the same attention as do conferences; accordingly, the news material they offer is not always newsworthy. When I asked McDermott (1994) about this, he said,

most of the releases we get are useless, you know, we only seriously look at maybe 10 to 20 per cent of the releases that come in, and only a few of those make it into the paper.

In short, if sources can't make a big deal out of an event, rarely will they call a conference; this implies the special nature of the conference, as a channel through which reporters can expect especially newsworthy material to flow.

Dominique (1994), a media relations staffer with the *Hornets*, explains the philosophy behind arranging a press conference:

The first thing we do is fax out "Media Advisories" to all the sports reporters one day in advance of the conference, just to let them know about it, maybe give them some background about what it's going to be about. Then we follow the Advisories up with a phone call, again, just to remind them about the conference, sort of whet their appetites, you know....

We have everyone there who matters [referring to source officials, the subjects of the conference, and so on]. Depending on what the conference is all about, we make sure the coach and player or players involved are there to make a statement and answer the media's questions. If it's really important, we'll get the team president or general manager to be there so they can do interviews and answer questions; having big shots like them at the conference lets the media know it's a big deal.

Since "everyone who matters" is in attendance, the press conference constitutes a rich news source for sports reporters. Thus, press conferences are not only *prima facie* newsworthy events, but they facilitate sports newswork in that reporters are able to collect a lot of news material at one location in a brief period of time.

By tapping into this rich news source, sports reporters often access enough information to generate one, and sometimes several news items. Burkley (1994) explains that,

When you go to a conference, it's usually a pretty big deal so you do a story about the conference, you know, what the whole thing was about generally. But you also get spin-off stuff where you pick one aspect of the conference and do a feature on it. For example, say a team calls a conference to announce they've signed a big name

player; you'll write a story about that. But maybe the guy left behind his family, or whatever.... What I mean is there's always more to write about than the big story, you know, there's always something else.

An recent example drawn from the sports pages of the *Ottawa Citizen* (November 17, 1994), a broadsheet metropolitan daily, illustrates this. The beleaguered *Ottawa Rough Riders*, on the heels of a 4-14 season, held a major press conference to comment on recent financial troubles plaguing the organization, and to announce plans for the off-season. Three articles, one a feature length piece, and one column were generated from this one press conference. Likewise for the *Ottawa Sun*: two articles and one column.¹⁴

Press conferences organized by major commercial sports organizations thus provide reporters with a wealth of easily accessible and newsworthy material that moves reporters one step closer to fulfilling their daily obligation to generate sports news.

Commercial sports organizations and their media relations units facilitate sports newswork in several other ways. First, they provide reporters with facilities and services at event venues. Take the *Hornets*, for example, who

provide reporters with a lunchroom, access to the players, but mostly physical facilities. For example, the press box allows them to see the game; we provide them with the scores from out of town games while they're watching this one; we have "runners" to distribute information to the press box at the arena. They also get access to video replays, so that takes extra TV's and VCR's and an extra person to man that equipment. We have a conference room

¹⁴ These are not pseudonyms; both papers are metropolitan dailies.

here [at *Hornets* head offices] where we hold our news conferences (Rouge 1994).

The *Flames* also have a media lounge at the team's stadium where reporters can gather before and after a game to exchange notes, comment on the game's highlights, and conduct their interviews with team officials like the President and Director of Player Personnel (Jones 1994).

At event venues, commercial sports organizations have press boxes fully equipped with telephones and power sources where reporters can hook-up lap top computers, faxes, modems, and other "tools of the trade." This enables reporters to immediately get in touch with their editors; this is necessary if a reporter is going to be late submitting a story because the game went into overtime. Moreover, reporters are also able to contact their sources to obtain statistics or to verify the facts they may be basing a news item on. These services and facilities save reporters a lot of time because they are able to complete their work — their newsgathering, such as interviews and telephone calls to sources, as well as their writing — at one location.

In addition to these facilities and services, I found that both the *Flames* and *Hornets* provide reporters with "*runners*," who are similar to parliamentary pages or newspaper copy-chasers. "Runners distribute information to the press box, mostly scores from the other games around the league that night," explains Rouge (1994), "You know, reporters get the scores from out of town games while they're watching this one." Reporters covering the *Flames*' home football games regularly receive updated game statistics, delivered to them in the press box at the end of each quarter,

This lets the print guys write their stories as the game goes on, which is important because by the time the game is over, they don't have a whole lot of time before they have to file their stories" (Jones 1994).

This service helps reporters cope with the demanding pressures of meeting the *Examiner's* writing deadline. The continuous supply of information reaching reporters in the press box enables reporters to write their items as the game progresses. All they have to do at the end of the game to complete their story, aside from routine editorial revisions, is get the requisite quotes from the athletes and coaches. McLarty (1994), a sports reporter for the *Alklemorb Observer*, calls this "rent-a-quote":

Basically, when the game is over I know what the story is; I've usually written it by the time I go to the locker room. So, all I need to get is a few quotes from the players and coaches, the usual stuff: "We gave it 100 per cent," or "We never quit out there today," you know, the stuff you always read. It's like renting a quote, because you always get the same thing from them.

McLarty (1994) here points to the importance of quoting athletes and coaches when writing sports news items. Regardless of whether what they say is lame, trite and/or unimaginative, reporters must get quotes from athletes and coaches, the primary social actors in the sports world. I will return to this last point in the final section of this chapter when I discuss the personal relationships that characterize relations between reporters and their routine sources.

It was interesting to find that both major commercial sports organizations I studied, the *Flames* and the *Hornets*, provided catered meals for sports reporters prior to the start of all games. This is provided free of charge by the *Flames*, while

the *Hornets* charge a mere five dollars. Frederick (1994) of the *Flames* explains the reasoning behind this,

We try to make things as hospitable as possible for the media guys. A lot of these guys will be working their shift right up to 4 or 5 o'clock and then come flying down to the stadium and don't get a chance to get something to eat. It just makes it easier for them because they don't have to stop and grab something to eat; they can come right to the stadium and get to work. You know, it just helps them do their job in a small way (emphasis added).

Without having to stop for a meal, reporters can drive directly to the arena or stadium, arriving well before the scheduled start of the event. This is important because the extra time enables reporters to do some of the legwork necessary to cover a major commercial sports event, such as doing pre-game interviews, going over the teams' statistics, identifying player match-ups to follow during the game. Moreover, it is important for reporters to have plenty of time before a major sports event to roam about. As Snead (1994) points out, it's important for sports reporters to arrive early to cover a commercial sports event because,

you get some really good stuff this way. Things happen during warm-ups all the time, like a fight might break out among the players ... And there's a lot of scuttlebutt in the hallways before a big game, you know, there's player agents, league officials and general managers all over the place and you'd be amazed at the sort of things you overhear them talking about. Really, it's astounding the number of great stories that have been uncovered simply because a reporter overhears a conversation in a hallway before a game ... You also get some good [information] at the meal, because all these same executive types [player agents and team and league officials] are usually there too, talking business or whatever. It's also a good opportunity to corner them for an interview, or at least for some comments on that night's game.

Not only are sports reporters assured of a full stomach when covering a *Flames* or *Hornets* game, but catered meals afford them an opportunity to go about their newsgathering virtually from the moment they arrive at the venue, collecting information and rumours while they eat with colleagues and team officials. Once again, commercial sports organizations facilitate sports newswork.

Taken together, these services — press releases, press conferences, press boxes at event venues, and the like — combine to make sports newswork more manageable. As Jones (1994), *Flames'* Director of Communications, puts it, "Really, the facilities are there for reporters to do their jobs. Everything they need we make sure it's there for them." The volumes of information which are literally at sports reporters' fingertips as a result of all this helps them to meet the *Examiner's* demand that they generate fresh copy from their beats every day under fixed deadlines. These services make sports newswork more manageable.

This is not to suggest, however, that sports reporters' work is done for them by media relations staffers. The newswriters I studied exercised a great deal of creativity and judgment in their work in terms of selecting what events will become the subject of a news item: determining who constitutes a source; how an event will be reported, that is, the star of the story, and its context; the location of the item in the sports section, whether it is featured or buried. But what I am suggesting is that, consistent with Theberge and Cronk (1986): in order to do their job, sports reporters must have ready and frequent access to reliable news sources from which a steady stream of sports news flows that is appealing to contemporary sports news consumers. Commercial sports organizations best meet this need because of the perceived greater public interest in them, and the great extent to which they facilitate newswork.

Up to this point I have only examined the positive aspects of facilitating sports newswork from the perspective of the individual reporter; that is, how it makes it easier for them to cope with the pressures and constraints rife in the *Examiner's* sports newswork environment. Yet, as I pointed out in Chapter 2, there is a negative side to commercial sports organizations facilitating sports newswork.

The problem is that because it is the major commercial sports organizations are the ones which can most afford to provide this subsidy, they are most frequently all that is captured in the *Examiner's* sports news net. As a result, these organizations become routine sources of sports news and devour most of the available column space in the *Examiner's* sports section. Non-commercial sports organizations generally lack the facilities and resources, both human and financial, to provide newswriters with the subsidy they need to do their job: thus they receive only a modicum of coverage at best. The reason commercial sports organizations go to such expense to secure media access is, quite simply, they *need* the coverage.

As noted in Chapter 2, the existence of sport itself does not depend on media coverage *per se*. However, the success and continued existence of sport as a commodified form of entertainment and spectacle *does*. The mass media are necessary vehicles for transmitting the information that generates public interest in commercial sports. Thus, commercial spectator sports, including professional but also amateur sports such as the Olympics and some high-profile university sports, like football, basketball and hockey, have the greatest need for media coverage (Theberge and Cronk 1986; Koppett 1981).

A point which may be derived from this is that media coverage amounts to free publicity (Telander 1984; Smith 1976; McFarlane 1955). As Burkley (1994) puts it,

The best advertising in the world is a story in the paper. They can put out a full page ad and say "Come on to City University, it's got the best football team in Canada"; or, they could have articles in the newspapers all year long on how great the football team is, you know what I mean? If people are constantly reading articles in the paper about how good the football team is, they're going to take that seriously, they'll start to believe it, and they'll think it's a great university to go to. You know, an article in the paper is a lot more believable than an advertisement. It's free promotion, and that's the best way to promote your school, by getting your name out there constantly (emphasis added).

Jones (1994) makes a similar observation on the importance of press coverage, especially to commercial sports organizations:

Coverage is really important. You know, it's like free advertising. If you want to pay for an advertisement in the *Examiner*, you're paying x amount of cents per word or line. If you get a story written about you that's positive, it's like a free ride, for sure. If you're a PR person who keeps his club, in conjunction with his marketing department, in a positive light, then that's all the free advertising in the world for you (emphasis added).

From this perspective, it is hardly surprising why commercial sports organizations go to such lengths to facilitate sports newswork.

The bottom line is, we want coverage for our team. You have to maximize the coverage of your team, you know, keep your name in the paper (Rouge 1994).

The most effective way for sports organizations to obtain media coverage is by facilitating sports newswork, such that newswriters come to *depend* on these organizations for the bulk of their news material. Commercial sports organizations

go to such lengths to facilitate sports newswork for the sole purpose of obtaining regular and extensive press coverage of their activities in the form of sports news (cf. McFarlane 1955). In short, newswork is facilitated for promotional purposes.

Commercial sports organizations try to set the agenda of public discourse on sport in the world of commercial sports (cf. Hackett 1988; *Royal Commission on Newspapers* 1981d). A news item places an event on the agenda of public discourse; it is something people will talk about, something that has the potential to generate public interest. For example, during the C.F.L.'s off-season this past year, the *Examiner* reported that the *Flames* had been in contact with a former National Football League head coach, now a broadcaster for a major U.S. television network, and were trying to sign him as their new head coach. Burkley (1994) picks up the narrative from here.

The story had some grounding, you see, because someone said the *Flames* had been in conversation with his agent, so you have to report that. But really, it was bogus from the start, I mean, there's no chance he would come to Canada to coach in the C.F.L. But you have to report you heard that, that they were at least talking, because it could just happen — who would have thought the *Oilers* would have traded Gretsky, right?

Whether there was any substance to the story is debatable. But the point is, it turned out to be a media relations coup for the *Flames* because they had succeeded in capturing headlines for several days — an exceptional feat considering it was during the off-season, "Oh yeah, we got a few days of prime coverage... people couldn't stop talking about it" (Jones 1994). Thus, as a result of this press coverage, the *Flames* set the agenda of public discourse; they became the center of much public discussion about sports.

It is this last point which explains why some sports organizations issue so many press releases. Quite simply, they want to get their names in the paper, to stay in the public light, to be a topic of conversation. Jones (1994) shared his views on this with me,

It's hard to say how many releases I put out in a week. You'll get different answers from different PR directors, because different ownership groups have different agendas. Some ownership groups might say "I want a release put out everyd-y," while others may want you to keep them to a minimum, you know, save it for the big stuff.

I asked him to explain why sports organizations would want to put out so many press releases.

Why? Because they want to keep themselves in the news. The idea is to flood them [newswriters] with releases and they're bound to cover some of them, you know, the more lines you have in the water, the more fish you'll catch (emphasis added).

This is a very telling exchange, capturing the essence of media relations: successfully promoting a sports team means regularly obtaining press coverage of its activities.

On this last point, Rouge (1994) draws an interesting parallel between promoting sports and promoting major motion pictures, and the centrality of obtaining maximum press coverage to both:

Look at what *Disney's* doing with the *Lion King*. It's unbelievable all the free publicity they're getting for that movie. They're releasing, you know, how it was made, feature stories on the people who did the voices, who did the music, the songs. When they released the movie, for two weeks in the local papers you had those

stories; **but is it really a news story or is it free publicity?**
(emphasis added)

Rouge (1994) makes a key point when he poses the question: "but is it really a news story or is it free publicity?" Sources want so much coverage because "news" is a promotional tool, generating public interest in the activities of a sports organization. Krusher (1994), who coaches a university football team, provides a good example of how a news item operates as a promotional tool:

You can't pay for the kind of publicity a news item gets you. You buy an advertisement in the local paper for an upcoming game and it's going to cost you hundreds of dollars for a small little ad. However, if you can call them with a certain angle and indicate so-and-so won an award this week and we're really proud of him, and **we're really hoping he's going to play well in this Saturday's game against Concordia University, 2:00 pm at Eagle Field.** You see? You've covered two things with this: you've given the reporter an angle for a good story, and you're also getting free publicity for your upcoming game (emphasis added).

Given that "the best advertising in the world is a story in the paper" (Burkley 1994), media relations people are fully aware of the promotional potential a positive news item has. In essence, news items are used as vehicles for advancing a source organization's own interests, which is primarily to generate public interest in their activities.

To this end, they view much of the material they provide to reporters for the purpose of facilitating newswork as "tools." Rouge (1994) explained how they use these tools in an effort to effect control over the content of sports news in the daily press:

It's up to you as an organization to present the information you want reported in the media.... The way I release news is a tool; it's how I get out the message I want through the media. Like, I can sit down and write a press release and it's the information I want out there. The quotes that are in it are the quotes that I get from management or players or whoever; and those are often the quotes that are picked up when they [reporters] write stories. So it's really what comes out of this office that a lot of the time gets printed, maybe not my words, but the essence of the information I give them often becomes the basis of a story (emphasis added).

With regard to press conferences and how they afford media relations people a degree of control over what becomes sports news, Jones (1994) maintains,

Your press conference allows you to get your message out... its something you control.

I asked him to explain what he meant by "controlling" the flow of information; what is it about conferences that gives him this control?

You set the agenda. Essentially, you're giving them all [sports reporters in attendance at the conference] the same basic facts, you know, the same story, but its up to them to put their own angle on it. So you give the facts to them, the stuff you want reported. Then the conference breaks up and there's a scrum with reporters running all over the place interviewing whoever they want. But they all end up with the same basic story more or less (emphasis added).

This illustrates how source organizations try to manipulate the content of sports news in the daily press. By placing information on sports reporters' agenda through releases and conferences, sources are able to control to a certain extent what is reported and how — they control what becomes sports news. Having this

sort of control is especially useful to source organizations when they are faced with the specter of negative publicity.

As noted in chapter 2, sports organizations rush to issue press releases or hold news conferences at the first scent of bad publicity, in an effort to effect "damage control" (Frederick 1994). By doing so, the source has a better chance of controlling the facts of the deviance and how they will be reported in the media — negative points can be downplayed and positive ones highlighted. Jones (1994) explains that,

If one of your players gets busted for drugs or something like that, then you'll call a press conference to respond to that story. You don't want to be perceived negatively in society, it's just not beneficial to your club. So you have to present to the media some sort of alternative to fix things. Of course you don't lie, you try to put a positive spin on it.... **So negatives are just there to be turned into positives, as far as the media goes, and positives are there to be hyped (emphasis added).**

Rouge (1994), the *Hornets'* Director of Media Relations, made a similar observation when I asked him how he deals with an event that could turn out to be bad publicity for the team.

Well there's two sides to every story. Everything doesn't come down to putting a positive spin on it, but telling the truth. If you don't tell the truth they'll find out, you know, these reporters are professionals and they'll find out if you're lying. So when something bad happens, the first thing you do is find out what happened. If it's really bad, you can't really smooth it over. All I can do is ensure we have a position, as an organization, on the issue. I call it **crisis management (emphasis added).**

In short, what the empirical material shows, is that commercial sports organizations go to great lengths and expense to facilitate sports newswork in

order to secure as much positive coverage of their activities as possible. They want this coverage because what it amounts to is free advertising.

However, the promotional nature of the materials generated by media relations offices is not lost on newswriters. Indeed, the *Examiner* sports newswriters I interviewed were generally distrustful of media relations. Dewey (1994) explains that,

Most of the newsworthy stuff is never press released because it's usually negative stuff. You know, the *Hornets* aren't gonna send out a press release saying Ozenko [a prominent rookie player] had a sordid past in the Soviet Union or something like that. Likewise, the *Badgers* aren't gonna send out a release saying they lost \$500, 000 last year. So the only press releases you get is the stuff they want you to know (emphasis added).

Colvin (1994) makes a similar observation, arguing that media relations staffers,

are only going to tell they you what they want to come out [in the press]. For example, what the PR guy's gonna tell you is that Whit was named Rookie-of-the-Month. Okay, that's great, but the PR guy's not gonna tell you Whit sent the club a letter saying he wants to renegotiate his contract, they're not gonna tell you that, and obviously it's a bigger story... You don't get this kind of story from a PR guy! (emphasis added)

The point is that newswriters are wary of the promotional materials put out by commercial sports organizations.

To counter the promotional bias of this material, reporters cultivate and maintain an extensive network of sources on their beats. As Barnes (1994) notes,

When I say sources, I don't really mean PR guys; they're a good source. They know what's going on. But for the most part, they're just promoting their team.

The sources Barnes (1994) refers to range from the obvious — players, coaches and management officials — to the not so obvious — front office staff, equipment managers, and trainers. But taken together, they coalesce to become vital components of the sports newswork machine, providing a wealth of information that would not be available to reporters were they to rely solely on media relations people.

Dewey (1994) elaborates on the need for such a diverse network of sources. I asked him how important it is for sports reporters to have sources other than media relations people on your beat, and his response was unequivocal:

They're lifeblood. They're the ones that provide you the information, I mean, you can't rely on information from the PR people....

Really, sources are different from PR people. They're totally different because PR people are only going to tell you what they want to get out. Sources, they're people that, whoever it may be, are people who may be associated with the team, or might know a player. They give you rumours, you know, and we check them out.... It would be tough to do the job without them. I mean, they're the ones that give you the information. A source can give you something and you don't have to say who it is (emphasis added).

The benefit of having such a diverse group of sources on any sports beat is mostly a matter of being able to generate a lot of news on a daily basis, news which does not solely serve the promotional interests of a commercial sports organization.

As we saw above, reporters cannot count on media relations staffers to provide them with much in the way of news items that may be controversial, or which may put the sports organization in a bad light. Yet these are often the most newsworthy stories (Snead 1994). And since reporters cannot very well expect a source to cut its own throat by exposing its deviance, you must have sources who

are willing to do so. Dewey (1994) offers an example of this, drawing from his experience as the *Examiner's* reporter for the *Badgers* beat,

Most of the time when I'm writing about the *Badgers*, I'm mostly writing about players, you know, something that happened in the game, that kind of thing. But if there's something developing, say, attendance for the baseball team starts going down, I'm gonna want to try and find out why. If I call the *Badgers* PR guy, he'll tell me, "Well, it's bad weather" or something like that, you know, something they can't control. But maybe it's something to do internally within the organization, and that's why attendance is down. So I'll call someone in the organization I know, and ask them to see if I can get to the bottom of it. But if I don't have these sources, I get no story (emphasis added).

This quote shows the importance of having news sources other than media relations people; reporters certainly cannot rely on the organization to "air its dirty laundry." Colvin (1994) provides an example which underscores this point.

So, this again is where your beat sources come in. Like, last year I had a good story that Dieter Svan wanted 1.2 million dollars. Well, that was a big story and it just so happens I got it from somebody who saw the contract, looked at it, and called me and said, 'Bruce, you won't fucking believe what Dieter Svan's asked for!'.... You see, without a source in the *Hornets* organization, I never would have got that story. Rouge [the *Hornets* Director of Media Relations] sure as hell wouldn't have given it to me — they wait until they're ready to break that kind of stuff, you know, when it suits them.

The point is, maintaining a broad and diverse network of sources on a sports beat pays off in terms of generating news material of the sort not likely to be revealed by a commercial sports organization. Reporters could not possibly generate this kind of material were it not for their personal sources on the beat. Thus, sports reporters must be careful they don't slash their own wrists by offending and

alienating these sources. As Telander (1984) reminds us, "Beat reporters are useless if nobody talks to them." Thus there is a great deal of pressure on sports reporters to not only cultivate close relationships with their sources, but to write news items that will not alienate them from these invaluable sources.

As discussed in Chapter 2, reporters who offend their sources may suffer retribution in the form of sanctions: they may be physically accosted; be "given the cold shoulder" or "the silent treatment"; or possibly barred from a team's clubhouse (Telander 1984; Smith 1976; Surface 1972; McFarlane 1955). These sanctions are very cogent to the sports reporter because it means that s/he will be unable to work, that is, do the job for which s/he has been employed (McFarlane 1955). Reporters are not of much use to their news organizations if they can't obtain quotes from athletes and coaches, the essential features of any sports news item in the daily press.

There were two particularly extreme examples of source sanctioning related to me by *Examiner* sports beat reporters. First, Burkley (1994) related an incident involving the *Flames*, where the *Examiner's* beat reporter, Barnes, had written a feature on the team towards the latter part of the season. The article was basically a "report card," where Barnes graded the team's performance to date on a position-by-position basis. As Burkley (1994) notes, "that's always tough because nobody's going to be happy, they'll all think they should have done better than what you grade them." The day after the article appeared in the *Examiner*, Barnes was at the *Flames* clubhouse going through his routine beat round,

[when] they basically surrounded him in the dressing room and just tried to intimidate him, you know, somebody threw a great big container of water on him. He was pretty intimidated, because he was there all alone, basically the team and him. Technically, he could have charged them with assault, but you'd never do that. The next day he wrote a column, real tongue-in-cheek, saying, like, sorry I didn't realize that the worst team in the CFL deserved all A's on their report card.... Anyway, you're gonna piss people off no matter what. But that's going way too far (Burkley 1994).

Dewey (1994) recounted a second example of extreme source sanctioning. Last season he wrote a critical article about how crowded the team's bus was on a road trip, how players were complaining about having to sit in the aisles and on equipment bags at the back of the bus:

Anyway, about a week after that story ran, there was a big meeting after a game in the manager's office, but I wasn't allowed in; I thought maybe there was a big trade in the making or something like that. After the meeting, they said for us [reporters] to come in and sit down. The manager, the general manager of the team, and the [major league affiliate's] minor league director was there. They said, 'You can't write stuff like that,' you know, 'you can't write about the bus', and 'we're thinking about not letting you on the bus anymore.'....

So this year there's a new manager and they don't allow us on the bus if there's no flying involved on the trip. So they're going down to Scranton and it's all bus, but we're not allowed on so I have to drive it, I guess.

As a result of writing this negative news item, Dewey was banned from accompanying the team on its road trips, at least as far as traveling with the players.¹⁵

¹⁵ As a point of interest, Burkley (1994) offered this observation on the *Badgers'* actions: "Consequently we don't go on the road with them anymore as much as we used to, it would cost us too much. So they don't get as much coverage and it just hurts them in the long run."

Both examples demonstrate the extremes sources will go to in seeking retribution against a reporter who has offended them. Bear in mind, however, that these were extreme examples. While the empirical evidence supports the general notion of source sanctioning advanced in the literature, I found consistently that the type of sanctions applied are not as extreme as the literature suggests. Indeed, most of the newswriters and media relations staffers I interviewed were hard pressed to recall any incidents as extreme as the two recounted above. What I found to be a more typical form of sanction than a punch in the nose, or the "freezing out" of a recalcitrant reporter from the locker room, was a refusal by offended sources to facilitate newswork. This also is a central finding of McFarlane's (1955) study of sports promotion, and Telander's (1984) work on athlete-reporter relationships in American professional sports.

Commercial sports organizations don't want the kind of bad publicity a negative news item constitutes, and are willing to go out of their way to make reporters aware of this (McFarlane 1955). For example, Dewey (1994) explains how a couple of years ago he wrote an item revealing that a Junior 'A' hockey player who, upon learning he had been traded to the local Junior 'A' club, decided instead to play in a professional league on the east coast.

I wrote about that and I got in trouble from the junior hockey team's PR person. He gave me crap for writing about something negative when I should have been writing about positive stuff, like a big upcoming game or something

[What happened as a result?]

Oh, not much, you know, they were pissed off at me for a while, didn't really want to talk to me. But that kind of thing eventually blows over.

Sanctioning reporters who write negative news items, albeit minor in this instance, is a typical response from sources who feel they've been wronged.

The experience of being sanctioned for writing what their sources consider to be negative news items was common among the *Examiner's* sports reporters. Consider the following interview excerpts:

"They may not talk to you, but that usually only goes on for a few days, in my experience" (Barnes 1994).

"You're always gonna piss off your sources at one time or another. Usually they just won't talk to you for a while, they'll ignore you, you know, not return your calls, tell you nothing's going on [with the beat] when really there is, that sort of bullshit" (Burkley 1994).

"Well most of them will say 'That's the last fucking time I'm telling you anything,' and then after awhile cooler heads prevail. Like, one of the defencemen [for the *Hornets*] I talk to a lot, he says 'Well, fuck, why'd you bag me in the paper?' and I says back to him, 'Because that's my job. You know you played bad, I know, and you can't hide from the 10,000 people who saw you play bad, too.' Christ, they'd laugh my ass out of town if I didn't write that the guy played like shit" (Colvin 1994).

"If it's a bad enough story, they'll probably tell you to go fuck yourself next time they see you. They may also never speak to you again, or at least threaten not to; I've had that happen to me. Or at least, you'll never get a tip-off from them about anything, that's for sure" (Snead 1994).

Notice the undercurrent running throughout these quotations: sources react to negative coverage — thus, negative publicity — by threatening to cut off the

offending reporter's access to news material. This is, in a sense, the source's trump card.

The reasoning behind this is premised on the notion that reporters will be more inclined to write positive news items if they feel their access to a reliable source of information is threatened by doing otherwise (McFarlane 1955). Burkley (1994) explains that it is indeed difficult for a reporter to write a negative story when it's likely to offend a routine news source:

Well, yeah, it's tough when you've got to write something about one of your sources and you know it's going to really piss them off. The good ones understand I'm just doing my job, and I'm going to treat them fairly. But some of them, especially players, go nuts, you know, "What the fuck did you write that for? You ain't getting nothing from me again."

Like I said, some guys are cool with it, they know I'm just doing my job.... But it's tough knowing I could lose a really good source by writing something they won't like.

I asked Burkley (1994) if it makes him think twice about writing a negative story, knowing it could cost him a news source: "Absolutely. All the time."

This shows how sources are able to control to a certain extent what becomes sports news. If a source manages to sway a reporter from writing a negative and potentially damaging news item by threatening to cut off access to the source in the future then the source has managed to exert some control over what becomes sports news; it is possible that some news items will be suppressed based on a source's potentially volatile reaction to it. As Burkley (1994) notes, "the best reporters are the ones with the best sources," so reporters must think long and hard about writing an item that may cost them one of the important sources in their stable.

Significantly, the reporters I interviewed were more concerned with being sanctioned by one of their contacts than by a commercial sports organization. As Snead (1994) explains,

You'd never get a PR guy cutting you off. They'll always send you releases and invite you to conferences because they can't afford not to. If they're pissed off because you wrote something they didn't like, you know, you said they sucked, or whatever, they've still got to do their job because if they don't, you can just write about that, that they're an amateur organization, uh, they're hiding from the media, whatever. You see, that's bad publicity for them, too. It's a no winner for them that way.

Burkley (1994) makes a similar observation,

PR people's job is to feed us information. Like the guy with the *Hornets* [Gaston Rouge], he has three people under him and that's what their job is — to feed us.... They won't cut you off for writing negative stuff, they can't. I mean, if we didn't write it as we see it, we'd lose our readers because they know if the team isn't playing well. If all we wrote were positive stories, then we'd lose a lot of credibility with our readers. So, uh, what I mean is they expect that we'll write negative stories, it's just the way it is. So it wouldn't do them any good to ban me from their locker room just because I write a piece criticizing management or whatever.

To get the views of a media relations staffer on this matter, I asked Rouge (1994) if he has ever sanctioned a reporter for writing a news item he felt was too negative or unfair. He explained that he would never "freeze out" a reporter for writing negative news items: "Even if you don't like the guy, you think he's irresponsible or a sensationalist.. your job is to maximize the coverage of your team" (Rouge 1994). Commercial sports organizations will not sever their relations with a reporter, simply because they need the coverage too much to take

such drastic action. In other words, reporters can expect, indeed count on, a commercial sports organization to supply them with news material even after they've been critical of the team or its management in the press. Clearly, the most effective and cogent sanctions for the reporter originate with their contacts on the beat, not with commercial sports organizations.

As noted earlier, it is personal contacts on the beat — players and athletes, as well as front office staff, trainers, equipment managers, and so on — that sports reporters rely on most for the inside information on commercial sports. Reporters are more concerned with being sanctioned by these contacts because they fear losing access to the crucial flow of inside information on the world of commercial sports they provide. Remember, organizations won't expose their own deviance, or anything negative because it doesn't make for good publicity (McFarlane 1955). So if an athlete is involved in criminal activity, for example drunk driving or selling steroids, their sports organization is not likely to instruct its media relations people to issue a press release or call a conference to break the story. The organization will respond to such an occurrence, but this is only after the story has been broken in the media. Commercial sports organizations take a reactionary stance towards potentially negative news and only adopt a proactive stance when it will serve their promotional interests. Yet, an inside source might tip off a reporter to such an occurrence, making them aware of it before the organization is prepared to break the story. In short, a reporter's network of contacts constitutes an important source of sports news. For this reason, reporters work hard not only to cultivate these sources on the beat, but also to maintain positive relations with them.

Colvin (1994) points out that the most important thing for sports reporters to do is to maintain positive relations with the players and coaches on their beat, as

they are arguably the most important news sources reporters have. He explains that, as a beat reporter for the *Examiner*,

I need people who are willing to tell me what's going on; who are willing to tell me, uh, you know, if there's going to be a trade, if somebody's going to make a move, if somebody's going to be sitting out of the lineup, that kind of stuff. I mean, I can meet deadlines; to me, it's bigger to have the story first.

I asked him, Then if you want to get these "inside stories" first, how important is to have good sources?

You've gotta have them! If you want anything good, you've gotta have good sources. I see my job as having to know everything that's happening with my team [Colvin works the *Hornets* beat], so I have to have the players, coaching staff and management trust me and tell me stuff on and off the record that they know I'm not going to screw them on. I want them to feel like they can confide in me and they can tell me what's going on.... The worst thing I could do would be to piss off my sources, because if I do, then they aren't going to talk to me and then I'm basically screwed (Colvin 1994).

Burkley (1994) made similar comments regarding the importance of having a network of personal sources on the beat, and the necessity of not offending them:

Oh your contacts on the beat are incredibly important — the best reporters are the ones with the best sources. If you have people on the inside who can tell you what's going on, that's good stuff, that's how you get the good stories. Like, for example, players know everything; they know what's going on. People think players are left in the dark, but no, the players know everything. If you have good contacts with the players, you know, a friendly relationship, they're the guys who are gonna say, you know, "they're trying to fuck us around" or whatever the story may be. So I tell them to confide in me and I'll protect them, you know, I won't name my sources....

Like, I know all the players on [one of the university basketball teams] and I go out drinking with them sometimes; so anything that comes out of that team, I'll get it first (emphasis added).

I asked Burkley (1994) if he ever feels compromised in terms of reporting sports objectively by having such close personal relationships with his sources, the very subjects he often writes about. He thought for a moment and replied,

Well, yeah, it gets tough when you have to write something about a guy that you know he isn't going to like. Usually they know I'm just doing my job, but some guys really take it personal if I trash them in the paper, you know, they won't talk to me anymore — this has actually happened to me with a university football coach.... It's just part of the job... I really don't want to piss off my sources because then they won't talk to me; but in the end you're gonna piss people off no matter what.

These comments from Colvin and Burkley show how important it is for reporters to maintain positive relations with their sources. They must be careful not to offend them because the source may very well sever their relationship. This would deprive the sports reporter of access to the steady stream of valuable inside information s/he needs to do their work.

Not only do contacts on the beat provide reporters with the kind of inside information they so badly need, but these contacts in effect **subsidize** reporters, by providing an accessible and steady flow of such sports news material. Colvin (1994) explains,

You depend on your sources so much, because PR guys are only gonna tell you what they want to come out.... For example, the biggest story I ever got was the *Flames'* Board of Directors resigned, and nobody knew. There were rumours flying all around

and nobody from the *Observer* was looking into it. So we were at the ball game one night and I said to Don Barnes [who works the *Flames* beat for the *Examiner*], 'Something's going on, keep your eye on the game, I gotta go check it out.' So I go down to the President's box and ask him what's going on; 'the CFL's got a meeting in Toronto on Friday and the rumour is you guys [the members of the Board of Directors] resigned.' And he says he's got no comment, the CFL will make a statement then. I say 'fine, but off-the-record what's going on?' He tells me he can't say anything.

So I had another source on the Board of Directors and I went to him and he said 'Look, Buck, we've all resigned, we've stepped down, and the CFL is gonna say tomorrow that it's taking over the team.' I'm thinking, 'Holy shit, this is big,' so I write it up. The next day it was the biggest story in the city, in the country, and we had it.

It is vital for reporters to cultivate and maintain a network of contacts on their sports beat if they want to get these kinds of stories. In the above quote, obviously the CFL and the *Flames* organization were not willing to break such a major news item until they were ready to do so. It took confirmation of a rumour from an inside source to break the story. Significantly, because Colvin (1994) had an inside source with the organization, he was able to scoop the *Observer* on this major story. This is a big deal. As Colvin (1994) notes,

The biggest thing for a reporter is to win: it's our game, you know? The players have their game on the ice and we have our game off the ice. If I can scoop Huxley [from the *Observer*], that makes me real happy. There's nothing better than the kill.

Without a network of contacts on the beat, however, Colvin would never have broken this, "the biggest story" of his career -- he would never have made "the kill."

Clearly, sports reporters depend on their contacts to provide them with a lot of potential news items on any given day. For example, recall the earlier

discussion of Colvin's (1994) beat round with the *Hornets*. He culls news material every day by talking to the *Hornets'* players and coaches, collecting the rumours and tips which constitute potential news items. Without these sources — if Colvin (1994) were to be frozen out, his contacts refusing to talk to him — he'd be left out in the cold and thus unable to do his job.

In light of this, it is clear why reporters must be careful not to alienate themselves from their contacts on the sports beat — these sources are their lifeblood. If a contact is offended because a reporter has written a negative item about them, or breaks a story and then implicates the contact as a key source thereby breaking a confidence between them, then the contact is likely to respond by severing relations with that reporter.

This last point is illustrated nicely by Krusher (1994), coach of a university football team. He explains that,

For me, it only comes to a personal thing. There's nothing I don't believe our athletic department would do to a reporter [in terms of sanctions]. But when it comes right down to it, if you object to a reporter's line of questioning, or how they've conducted an interview, yes, I have personally sanctioned a reporter. Now, I'm not in a position to say, 'You can't speak to our players,' I think the reporter is entitled to contact them and speak to them. But what it comes down to for me, is it's a personal thing, and it's only happened to me once before. I came to a point where I indicated I was no longer interested in speaking to that individual. But that then came after at least two or three opportunities where I indicated my concerns to this individual and it never changed. So when their line of questioning and approach didn't change after I expressed my concerns, I thought, 'I'm not interested in being a source, in continuing to provide information which then allows the individual to repeatedly report in this fashion,' so I just said to him, 'I'm not interested in speaking to you any further.' And I have not had a phone call since, although the individual is still reporting.

The impact of severing relations with a reporter is significant, because it means the reporter has lost an important source of information on their beat: someone they can turn to when they need something on a slow news day; someone to provide them with tips and rumours, and so on.

In effect, the offended contact is refusing to facilitate newswork, to make it easier for the reporter to do their job. Explains Krusher (1994),

If you like somebody, you're apt to go out of your way to make sure you're assisting them in any way, shape or form; whether it's giving them statistics, giving them extra details, calling them up when you feel there's a story that maybe they're not aware of that you think they may be interested in. And I've done that. Because we'll benefit in terms of getting some good coverage, and they benefit because I've provided them with a good story. Like, I'll call up a reporter and say, 'Did you know that so-and-so has won this award? It's not public knowledge yet, but it's okay to be released and I'm calling you up to let you know.' And then they would begin a story on this....

Whereas if you're a reporter that's come in and you've repeatedly, uh, ticked me off or whatever, then definitely in your line of questioning I'm going to answer, I'm going to be courteous, I'm going to try and do my job and be fair about it. But you're going to find shorter answers; you're not gonna get the extra details; you're not gonna get the phone call from me saying that something newsworthy has happened with our team and I wanted to let you know about it.

Krusher (1994) underscores the point that sources use access to inside information as a sanction. While Krusher will not totally cut-off a recalcitrant reporter — "I'd never do that because he'll just write something bad about that, you know, me cutting him off" — he will not, however, facilitate their work.

In a nutshell, sources are more inclined to facilitate the sports newswork of a reporter who they believe treats them fairly, a similar finding made by McFarlane (1955). Interestingly, to some sources "fairness" means writing positive sports

copy, rather than producing a balanced, objective and journalistically sound news item. Concerning commercial sports, Snead (1994) remarks quite cynically that,

Fairness to a PR flak means writing stories that will sell tickets. They seem to have the opinion that we're in this all together, you know, big time sports and the media, and we should work together to sell the product. But it just doesn't work that way.

In any event, the point is that sources who have been offended in one way or another by a reporter react by "going for the jugular": they threaten the reporter's news supply, and ultimately their ability to do their job.

If sources sever relations with sports reporters, it is next to impossible for those reporters to do their jobs. They need the tip-offs and rumours from athletes, coaches, secretaries, equipment managers, trainers and front-office staff, as well as interviews with athletes and coaches. Without the fountain of information this network provides, a reporter would not be able to generate fresh sports news from their beat every day — they need a constant flow of news material to do so. In other words, if sources turn off the tap to a reporter's regular flow of sports news, then s/he cannot do their job. Recalling the words of Telander (1984: 4) once again, "Beat reporters are useless if nobody talks to them." Thus, the sports reporter who lacks a vast network of sources on their beat is of no value to his or her news organization — quite simply, such a reporter is useless, at least with regard to sports beat reporting.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions

This study examined the social construction of sports news. The primary emphasis was on the work routines sports newswriters use in the daily manufacture of news, and how these contribute to the commercial sports bias on the sports pages of Canadian metropolitan dailies. These routines include selecting the events to cover; how they were reported (context, slant); cultivating and maintaining an extensive network of sources on a sports beat; and writing sports news items under the pressures and constraints of quotas and ostensibly inflexible deadlines. This study was thus concerned with how sports newswriters sift and select from among the myriad happenings in the sports world, "those to be reported and analyzed in the sports section, that is, to choose what will become sports news" (Theberge and Cronk 1986: 198). Since there is a paucity of research that considers the social construction of sports news, especially regarding the print medium, this study was exploratory in nature.

A model of sports newswork routines was developed, based on a selective review of the newswork literature and the sociology of sports literature. It explored the central theme of the study: commercial sports organizations receive regular and extensive coverage of their activities because they are able to facilitate sports newswork. Commercial sports organizations go to great lengths to make it easy for sports reporters and editors to do their job. In return, commercial sports

organizations enjoy the lion's share of space in the sports section of metropolitan dailies. Accordingly, only a modicum of space is accorded non-commercial sports.

Data to test this model were gathered over two months of field research conducted primarily in the newsroom, specifically at the sports desk, of an eastern Ontario metropolitan daily newspaper, the *Alklemorb Examiner*. The field research consisted of both non-participant observation of activities at the paper's sports desk, and interviews with the paper's sports newswriters. In addition, several hours were spent interviewing five media relations staffers from two major commercial sports organizations: the *Hornets* of the National Hockey League, and the *Flames* of the Canadian Football League.

The model of sports newswriting makes predictions at three levels. There are first-order predictions about how metropolitan daily newspapers operate as commercial enterprises. The model also makes second-order predictions about the relationships between sports reporters and their sources, and how these relationships impact on sports news content. And it makes third-order predictions about the motives behind commercial sports organizations' efforts to facilitate sports newswriting. The underlying conclusion at each level is that newswriting routines contribute to the commercial sports bias on the sports pages of Canadian metropolitan daily newspapers.

According to the first-order predictions of the sports newswriting model, metropolitan dailies, like other businesses, sell a product to buyers. Their market is advertisers; the "product" is readers, especially male audiences with disposable income, which generate the best advertising rates (Bagdikian 1992; Chomsky

1989; Gitlin 1985).¹⁶ In effect, the readers are a commodity generated by the news industry — an "audience commodity" (Bagdikian 1992; Sparks 1992; Jhally 1992, 1984, 1982; Leiss *et al* 1990). Metropolitan dailies sell access to readers. Moreover, they are fully attuned to the crucial importance of audience "quality": advertisers are interested in purchasing clearly defined and highly concentrated audiences, comprised of people inclined to buy whatever product the advertiser is selling. This is the "iron rule" of advertising-supported media: it is less important that people buy your product than they be the right people" (Bagdikian 1992). For a metropolitan daily marketing its sports readership, the "right kind of people" are eighteen to forty-nine year-old males with disposable income (Sparks 1992; Johnson 1988; Jhally 1982; Parente 1977; McPherson 1975). In short, this is the group with buying power that can be swayed by the right kind of advertising.

The prevailing philosophy in the sports news industry is that the most effective way to attract male readers is to provide extensive coverage of commercial spectator sports; that is, to cater to perceived male tastes in their sports coverage (Theberge and Cronk 1986; Rintala and Birrell 1984; Beamish 1984). The sports pages of metropolitan dailies are thus saturated with commercial sports news, as revealed by several content analyses (Gelinas and Theberge 1986; Rintala and Birrell 1984; Lever and Wheeler 1984; Bryant 1980; Scanlon 1970). Commercial sports are 'cash cows' and metropolitan dailies depend on them to "deliver the male" (Sparks 1992). Such status obtains regular and extensive press coverage for commercial sports organizations; an amount of coverage far exceeding that afforded non-commercial sports. What results, of course, is a saturation of sports pages with news of the commercial sports world.

¹⁶ To put it slightly different, "newspaper publishers are essentially people who sell white space on newsprint to advertisers" (in Chomsky 1989: 358, note 16).

The empirical evidence confirms the model on this point. The *Examiner* is an advertising-supported metropolitan daily, and thus depends on advertising to generate most of its revenue. With its sports section, the paper is required to cultivate a 'quality' audience commodity to sell to advertisers. Its approach to sports news reflects this by providing extensive coverage of commercial spectator sports. This philosophy — that the paper should cover the sports events and issues that have the widest interest primarily to male readers — rarely embraces non-commercial sports that are generally considered an afterthought at best. The *Examiner*'s approach to sports news content is summed up by Colvin (1994), one of the paper's sports beat reporters, when he says,

People want to read about professional sports, the big leagues, you know.... A lot of people don't watch little Billy go play ball at Trillium Park on a Friday night. I mean how much interest is there in amateur sports like that? Not enough to warrant a lot of coverage.

Commercial sports thus gobble up the majority of available columnar space in the sports section, while non-commercial sports are left to fight over the scraps.

At the *Examiner*, the first concern in planning the sports section each day is the commercial sports scene — what is happening in "the big leagues." Thus, the standard fare of the paper's sports news is game results from the previous day, player movement through trades and outright releases, injury reports on athletes,¹⁷ and the current status of any labour unrest. Reporting these items is

¹⁷ *USA Today*, for example, has a regular feature called "Injury Report", which chronicles the injury status of key players for each of the matchups in the National Football League that week. One selection from the 28 October 1994 *Injury Report*, lists the injury status for the Cleveland Browns vs. Denver Broncos game the following Sunday: Cleveland at Denver — Browns: CB Reginald Jones (knee), doubtful; WR Michael Jackson (hamstring), questionable; RB Randy Baldwin (foot), DE Rob Burnett (arm), DL Bill Johnson (leg), probable. Broncos: C Keith Kartz (knee), WR Mike Pritchard (kidney), LB Dave Wyman (knee), out; S Dennis Smith

the *raison d'être* of any metropolitan daily's sports section. As the *Examiner's* sports editor remarks, "This is the stuff people want to read about ... big time sports get you readers" (Roberts 1994). The paper's sports section is saturated with news of commercial spectator sports as a matter of economics — this is how a quality audience is attracted. A commercial sports news bias is thus a matter of financial survival for the *Examiner*.

The sports newswork model further predicts that, in light of these economic concerns, the *Examiner* would employ a coverage strategy based on a "beat" system of reporting. This is considered to be the most effective way to capture a regular supply of commercial sports news (Theberge and Cronk 1986; cf. Chomsky and Herman 1988; Fishman 1980). Briefly, beat reporting entails assigning a reporter(s) to a particular organization in order to provide regular coverage of a subject.

A sports reporter, for example, is assigned by the paper to cover the Toronto Blue Jays beat. Day-in and day-out, s/he reports on the team's activities; that is, anything that happens involving the team's ownership, its management and its players and coaches. The beat reporter is expected to know the beat intimately, and to write regular news items about its activities. In this manner, the newspaper gets regular coverage not only of the Blue Jays, but of Major League Baseball itself. How? Simply because the team does not exist in a vacuum. When the reporter writes about the Blue Jays, invariably this means covering the activities of all the other teams in the major leagues. The Blue Jays beat, therefore, generates a regular flow of baseball news not only about the team, but the whole of the sport. This system of sports reporting secures access for newspaper organizations access

(hamstring), doubtful; CB Randy Hilliard (Hamstring), TE Shannon Sharp (ankle), questionable; LB Elijah Alexander (leg), CB Ray Crockett (ankle), CB Ben Smith (shoulder), probable.

to a steady flow of commercial sports news of the sort needed to attract "the right kind" of readers required for the manufacture of a "quality" audience commodity.

The model also predicts that since establishing and maintaining a sports beat constitutes a significant investment of organizational resources, it follows that beat subjects will be featured in the paper; that is, they will receive extensive coverage in the most prominent pages of the sports section. Accordingly, non-commercial sports often find themselves buried in the back pages. The rationale behind this argument is simple: why would a newspaper make this substantial investment of organizational resources to establish and maintain beats, if not to use them to generate the bulk of the news it intends to fill the sports section with?

It is not surprising that the paper devotes the vast majority of the column space in its sports section to reporting activities from its sports beats. It costs "a hell of a lot of money" to establish and maintain these beats (Roberts (1994). For example, it costs the *Examiner* in excess of \$10,000 per year to provide beat coverage of the *Flames*, the local CFL franchise. As the sports editor explains, over and above reporter salary the paper has to pay for the beat reporters' transportation on road trips, hotels, and provide them with *per diem* money to cover their meals and incidentals,

Magnify that several times and that's what it costs us to cover the *Hornets*, because their season's a lot longer than football, you know, so you're paying for more road trips, more hotels, meals, all that stuff (Roberts 1994).

There are also human resources costs to consider with a system of beat reporting. When a reporter is assigned to cover a sports beat, the *Flames* beat for instance, that reporter is the *Examiner's* full-time *Flames* reporter; it is his/her job to

generate regular news of the *Flames'* activities. As a result, s/he is mostly unavailable to write other sports news items.

The impact on sports news content is significant. Essentially, the beat system limits the number of sports reporters available to cover non-commercial sports events, since these sports are not regularly covered by beat reporters. So, if the *Examiner's* three beat reporters are all occupied with their regular responsibilities (covering their respective teams), then that leaves only two deskers and one freelancer to cover the vast expanse of *Alklemorb's* non-commercial sports scene. Obviously, under these conditions, the opportunity for non-commercial sports to wrestle some news space from the grasp of commercial spectator sports is minimal. Moreover, because only the paper's best reporters are assigned to sports beats, it is arguable that the quality of non-commercial sports coverage is significantly less than that afforded to commercial sports. After all, it is unlikely the paper will assign a cub reporter or a reporter with marginal or average skills to cover a major sports beat; the newspaper has far too much invested in these beats to do anything but assign their best reporters to cover them.

The first-order predictions are thus confirmed. As predicted, the *Examiner* employs a system of regular beats to generate the bulk of its sports news. Beat reporters are assigned to cover the major commercial sports in *Alklemorb*, namely, the *Hornets* of the National Hockey League; the *Flames* of the Canadian Football League, and the *Badgers*, a Triple 'AAA' baseball club. And because of this, the paper's sports news content has a marked commercial sports bias. Indeed, the paper's assignment of beat reporters only to commercial sports organizations is strong evidence of the paper's commitment to providing extensive coverage of commercial sports as a means to generate a quality audience commodity.

The *Examiner's* sports section is saturated with commercial sports news as a matter of economic necessity. The paper employs a system of news beats to capture commercial sports news in its news net; this is the sort of sports news considered to attract the male readership the paper markets as a commodity to advertisers. In return for the enormous investment the *Examiner* has in these beats, it expects a vast and regular supply of commercial sports news to be generated from them daily.

Second-order predictions follow from this last point. The sports newswork model makes predictions about the relationships that develop between sports reporters and their sources that flow from the need for a consistent supply of commercial sports news; and how such relationships impact on sports news content in Canadian metropolitan dailies. What we find is the *Examiner's* sports newswork environment is rife with pressures and constraints which make it difficult for sports reporters in particular to do their work. Commercial sports organizations are very much aware of this, and go to great lengths to facilitate sports newswork — to make the job easier to do. As a result, commercial sports organizations become routine news sources, and thus secure for themselves regular and extensive press coverage of their activities.

The obligation to satisfy the *Examiner's* insatiable appetite for commercial sports news falls squarely on the shoulders of its sports reporters, especially beat reporters. Every day they are expected to generate news from their beats; this is a normative requirement. Indeed, this is not negotiable, as the paper has far too much invested in its sports beats for them sit idle. Roberts (1994), the sports editor, explains,

It costs us a hell of a lot of money to maintain a beat.... **Oh yeah, you bet they'd better produce!** We spend a lot of money to have these guys know what's going on with their team and to write about it (emphasis added).

I asked Snead (1994), a deskier with the paper, what would happen to a sports reporter who wasn't producing enough news items from his/her beat. His reply, though tongue-in-cheek, is telling: "He won't have his job for very long." Responsibility for covering a sports beat clearly entails an obligation to write something every day about its activities. Indeed, the obligation to generate news from the *Examiner's* sports beats is so strong that reporters are expected to do so even if they don't think there is anything newsworthy to report (cf. Fishman 1980). Snead (1994) explains,

There's always something to write about, whether it's the previous night's game, a trade rumour, maybe someone isn't playing well and they've been benched.... In the off-season it's not as bad [the pressure to produce news items every day] because there isn't as much happening day-in and day-out. But that doesn't mean a beat guy can let up, because we don't want to get beat on a story, ever! (emphasis added).

Thus, as the model predicted, responsibility for covering a sports beat at the *Examiner* entails an obligation to generate news from it every day.

Not only must sports reporters generate expectable quantities of fresh news from their beats every day, but they must do so under the constraints of fixed deadlines not of their choosing and beyond their control (Ericson 1989, 1987; Fishman 1980; Tuchman 1978; Sigal 1973). Sports news items at the *Examiner* must be submitted no later than the paper's 11:00 pm deadline; although reporters are expected to submit items as early as possible to allow for editing and other

preparatory work before they're ready to go to press. This poses a problem for beat reporters because *Alklemorb's* commercial sports teams almost invariably play their games in the late evening, often concluding only a half-hour or so before deadline. This places reporters under a great deal of pressure, as they have to complete their interviews with players and coaches after the game, and then quickly write the story; all typically within thirty minutes or so, just in time to transmit a copy of the news item back to the paper, either by fax or modem. Thus, as the model predicted, the *Examiner's* sports reporters do their work in an environment shot through with pressures and constraints.

In light of this, the model yields further second-order predictions, namely, that to cope with these exigencies of sports newswork, reporters have routine sources on whom they depend to provide the bulk of their commercial sports news material. The evidence bears this out.

The *Examiner's* sports reporters depend on sources who can provide them with a steady flow of commercial sports news material. Two source types were identified: commercial sports organizations' media relations units; and sports reporters' network of personal contacts on their beats. Both are routine sources because they facilitate sports newswork by satisfying reporters' need for news material every day. In essence, routine sources are a sports reporter's lifeblood.

Commercial sports organizations are routine news sources largely because they have media relations staffers whose sole purpose is to supply sports reporters — to facilitate sports newswork — with a constant stream of news material, such as: game statistics and summaries, media guides, player profiles, status reports on players' health, impending player trades, and so on. These are the raw materials reporters need to construct news items appealing to contemporary sports news consumers: "This is the stuff people want to read about," remarks Burkley (1994),

a sports reporter with the paper. A steady stream of sports news material is especially useful to reporters because what it does, in effect, is offer them story ideas. This is particularly helpful on slow news days when there is nothing particularly newsworthy to write about, yet beat reporters are obligated to write something.

Commercial sports organizations also supply reporters with news material through the judicious use of press releases, and a more selective use of press conferences. Both are channels through which commercial sports organizations pass on potentially newsworthy information to reporters, in effect offering reporters story ideas and the raw materials they need to write them. The advantage of all this for reporters is a lot of information is provided to them, making it easier to cope with the daily pressure of generating expectable quantities of fresh sports news from their beat under impending and inflexible deadlines.

Besides this, *Alklemorb's* commercial sports organizations also facilitate newswork by providing reporters with facilities and services at event venues and their corporate offices. The *Badgers*, *Hornets* and *Flames* all subsidize sports newsworkers in this manner. Their corporate offices, for instance, have furnished meeting rooms where news conferences are held; these are equipped with all the amenities necessary to accommodate the various media (print, radio and television), such as electrical outlets, telephones, and so on. Event venues have fully equipped press boxes: video equipment for instant video replays; television monitors which enable reporters to stay on top of other major sports events occurring at the same time as the event they're covering; runners who deliver game statistics to reporters on a continuous basis. As well, press boxes are equipped with electrical outlets and telephone jacks, enabling reporters to hook up lap top computers, faxes, and modems, what Burkley (1994) calls "the tools of the trade."

Facilitating sports newswork in this manner consolidates *Alklemorb's* commercial sports organizations' positions as routine news sources. It is to them that *Examiner* reporters turn for a great deal of their sports news material.

Personal contacts on a sports beat are also important and routine news sources for *Examiner* reporters. Athletes and coaches, team trainers and equipment managers, front office staff, player agents, league and individual team executives — all are vital contacts. Reporters depend on them to provide the "inside information" on the commercial sports world — in-fighting among management and players, star athletes who are demanding they receive exorbitant pay increases or be traded, secret negotiations among owners to impose salary caps, owners threatening to move their franchise to more lucrative markets in the face of poor attendance. It is this news which is arguably most appealing to contemporary sports news consumers — it is titillating and sensational. This type of sports reporting contributes to the manufacture of a quality audience commodity, as it is the sort of sports news males are supposedly most interested in reading about. Indeed, a metropolitan daily with a reputation for providing this sort of coverage is likely to have a devoted following of predominantly male readers, which clearly makes it a prime candidate for businesses looking for a publication to invest their advertising dollars in. Thus *Examiner* reporters work hard to establish and maintain positive relations with their inside sources in order to secure access to this gold mine of sports news material.

The empirical evidence thus confirms the second-order predictions. The *Examiner's* sports section is a "hungry beast," and sports editors need a large and frequent supply of commercial sports news to feed it every day. And it is sports reporters' responsibility to serve up this daily quantum of sports news — should they fail, "they won't have a job for long." Thus, in order to do their work — to

cope with the pressures of performing sports newswork at a major metropolitan daily newspaper — reporters must have reliable and frequent flows of commercial sports news material. For this reporters depend on their routine news sources.

This last point yields third-order predictions. At this level, the model predicts that sports reporters depend on their routine sources to facilitate their work by providing the bulk of their news material. Having this steady reliable and predictable flow of news material is the only way reporters can cope with the exigencies of doing sports newswork at the *Examiner*. The model further predicts that sports reporters' routine sources recognize and subsequently exploit this dependence to effect control over sports news content in the paper. Specifically, they want positive coverage of their activities on a daily basis.

Alklemorb's commercial sports organizations go to great trouble and expense to facilitate sports newswork. Through their media relations staffs, commercial sports organizations are constantly attempting to have favourable information about their events and athletes placed before the public in the form of news (McFarlane 1955). In doing so, they hope to increase public interest in their sport product. In other words, commercial sports organizations want regular and favourable coverage of their activities to obtain publicity — "publicity-as-news." What I mean by this is that a news item is worth a whole lot more in terms of its promotional value than a *bona fide* advertisement. There is an air of legitimacy about a news item which *bona fide* advertisements do not approximate.

Consider, for example, a series of several articles about the *Flames'* upcoming season. The writer may extol the virtues of the team's new coaching staff, and how the team's top draft picks and the free agents acquired in the off-season are going to lead the team to the "promised land" — to a CFL

championship. In effect, these news items are promoting the *Flames*. Compare this to an advertising campaign conducted by the *Flames*, where the organization pays for full-page advertisements in the *Examiner*, screaming such platitudes as "Get your tickets now, we're great, we're gonna rock the house" or "We're going all the way this year." The purpose of both is clear: to rally public support for the team, while at the same encouraging the public to buy season's tickets and merchandise. The point is, both news items and advertisements are promotional vehicles for the *Flames*. Yet there is a crucial distinction to be made: the promotional nature of the former is belied by its form as a news item.

Studies that have looked at this notion of sports news items as promotional vehicles do a good job of developing the concept and of uncovering the methods commercial sports organizations employ to gain access to the public through the media; for example, the use of press releases and news conferences (McFarlane 1955; Smith 1976; and to a lesser extent Telander 1984). Where they fall down, however, is in their very conception of "publicity-as-news" — these writers to a one suggest that this is free publicity. However, nothing could be further from fact.¹⁸ The empirical evidence indicates that publicity-as-news is rather an expensive undertaking for sports organizations. *Alklamorb's* commercial sports organizations invest vast amounts of money, time and human resources to provide *Examiner* sports reporters with services and facilities, to in effect facilitate their work, to make it easier for sports reporters to do their job. In return commercial sports organizations are rewarded with regular and extensive coverage in the paper. Thus, going to all the trouble and expense of facilitating sports newswork

¹⁸ McFarlane (1955: 60, note 1) does point out that "This space is considered to be free in as much as no money is paid directly to the newspaper offices as in "straight" advertising." To be sure, this is a valid conception. Yet I think it's important to recognize that obtaining publicity-as-news is indeed a very costly undertaking for sports organizations.

is necessary for *Alklemorb*'s commercial sports organizations' continued survival as businesses which promote sport as a commodified form of entertainment and spectacle — they need media coverage of their activities. It is, as the *Hornets*' Director of Media Relations puts it, simply "the cost of doing business" (Rouge 1994).

In a nutshell, commercial sports organizations go to great ends to facilitate sports newswork because they need the attendant coverage which invariably ensues. Essentially, news items in the paper are akin to publicity. Thus, most of the materials commercial sports organizations provide reporters are promotional in nature — they serve to advance only the source's interests. As noted in Chapter 4, this is especially the case with the two main channels through which news material flows from commercial sports organizations to reporters: press releases and news conferences.

The sports newswork model predicts that routine sources recognize reporters' dependence on them for the bulk of their commercial sports news material; and they try to exploit it to obtain favourable coverage for their sports product. As McFarlane (1955; cf. Smith 1976) in particular has shown, if a reporter doesn't help with this by writing positive sports copy, then sources are likely to retaliate with some form of sanction. For example, a source may assault a sports reporter who has written something they've taken offense to (Beddoes 1989; Telander 1984; Schechter 1970). However, by far the most cogent sanction for sports reporters is a threat to cut-off their access to the vital flows of sports material routine sources provide (Stebbins 1987; Telander 1984; Smith 1976; McFarlane 1955). It is this sanction sports reporters most fear.

However, such threats are only effective from personal contacts on the reporter's beat: *Examiner* reporters do not fear retribution from commercial sports

organizations at all. These organizations have to maintain relations with reporters because this is how they secure regular coverage of their activities in the form of publicity-as-news. As the *Hornets'* Media Relations Director puts it, "Even if you don't like the guy, you think he's irresponsible or sensationalist... your job is to maximize coverage of your team" (Rouge 1994). In other words, reporters can expect the steady supply of commercial sports news material to continue flowing from these commercial sports organizations even after they've been highly critical of the team: commercial sports' dependency on publicity-as-news dictates this.

It is instead retribution from their personal contacts *Examiner* sports reporters fear most. Reporters depend so heavily on their inside sources for news material that to lose access to them would more or less signify the end of their employment as a sports reporter — "Beat reporters are useless if nobody talks to them" (Telander 1984). *Examiner* sports reporters thus want to ensure their continued access to these vital sources; they certainly do not want to alienate themselves from their inside sources. This means not being too critical too often, especially with those inside sources who are public figures, living in a fish bowl so to speak, like athletes and coaches.

To a one, the *Examiner's* sports reporters consistently reported that they always run the risk of alienating themselves from their inside sources by writing negative news items. Sources do not take highly to critical news stories, especially those questioning a coach's ability to win games or a player's performance. Such negative and unflattering stories can prompt the subject of the story to "freeze up," refusing to speak to the recalcitrant reporter. In effect, offended sources can threaten to "turn off the tap" on the flow of inside information that reporters so badly need to do their work. Clearly, this may make sports reporters think twice before writing a critical news item.

The third-order predictions are thus confirmed. *Alklemorb's* commercial sports organizations go to great trouble and expense to facilitate sports newswork in order to secure for themselves regular and extensive coverage of their activities in the paper's sports section. Personal contacts also facilitate sports newswork, providing reporters with a lot of the "inside information" they need to write sports news appealing to contemporary sports news consumers. Sports reporters depend on these routine sources for the bulk of their sports news material and they work hard to cultivate and maintain close relationships with them. In turn, routine sources regularly take advantage — exploit — sports reporter dependency to manage the media, to effect control over what becomes sports news. Simply, because of their dependence on routine sources for most of their sports news material, reporters may feel obligated to mute criticism, water-down, or suppress entirely stories which may offend these routine sources. If this is so, which the evidence suggests is indeed the case, then commercial sports interests — both organizations and individuals — exploit their relationship with sports reporters to effect a certain degree of control over the *Examiner's* sports news content.

In short, the sports newswork model is systematically confirmed at all levels. Sports news at the *Examiner* is constructed with a distinct bias towards activities in the commercial sports world. Indeed, as this study demonstrates, there is little penetration of the sports pages by non-commercial sports. Thus, as long as the audience commodity metropolitan dailies are committed to generating is predominantly males, the work routines sports reporters employ will continue of necessity to construct sports news as news about commercial spectator sports. And this means the continued domination of the sports pages by the commercial sports world.

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