

University of Alabama in Huntsville

LOUIS

Honors Capstone Projects and Theses

Honors College

1997

The Language and Format of Sports News: An Analysis of ESPN's Sportscenter

Michael A. Napier

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/honors-capstones>



Part of the [Broadcast and Video Studies Commons](#), and the [Mass Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Napier, Michael A., "The Language and Format of Sports News: An Analysis of ESPN's Sportscenter" (1997). *Honors Capstone Projects and Theses*. 207.
<https://louis.uah.edu/honors-capstones/207>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Capstone Projects and Theses by an authorized administrator of LOUIS.

The Language and Format of Sports News: An Analysis of
ESPN's SportsCenter

by
Michael A. Napier

A senior thesis submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for
CM 431: Senior Seminar in Communication Theory

Senior thesis supervisor: Dr. Rountree

INTRODUCTION

"From way downtown, BANG!"

That is one of Keith Olbermann's catch phrases for describing a three-point shot on ESPN's sports news program *SportsCenter*. He borrowed the phrase from announcer Donny Most, but it has seemed to stick to Olbermann. It could be the little phrases like that that people like in the show.

This thesis looks at the language and format of *SportsCenter*. I chose *SportsCenter* because it is well established on Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) since the cable network's launch in 1979. I use a method similar to a 1977 study by Bryant, Comisky, and Zillman regarding classification of commentators' statements based on their purpose. This is to show how *SportsCenter* intends to maintain an audience by entertaining it while reporting all the major sports news of the day.

Sixty-eight million people watch the 11:00 p.m. *SportsCenter* in the United States (Kiesewetter, "Meet Dan Patrick"). Nielsen figures show that *SportsCenter* is seen by 15,201,000 different households in an average month (Bonk 1). The ability to entertain is the show's draw, but as a news show about sports, it is considered one of the most credible. According to 1994 national polling done by Sports Marketing Group, *SportsCenter* is the most credible television show among

males ages 12-24, and the third most credible television show among all males (Antonen).

The choice of words used by *SportsCenter* anchors have gotten the attention of the sports media as well. Dave Kindred of *The Sporting News* wrote a piece about *SportsCenter* in *The Los Angeles Times* in 1995, quoting many phrases used in the show. Thomas Bonk, a *Times* staff writer, did a similar review one year later.

I want to test existing methods of analyzing news programs by applying it for a specific genre, namely sports. There may be aspects of the sports genre that have not been covered in previous analyses of news shows. This study should serve as a start for scholarly communication analysis of sports news programming.

This paper begins with a literature review of communication studies that involve the analysis of sports broadcasts and regular network news broadcasts. In light of this review, I will describe my hypotheses regarding the language and format of *SportsCenter*. Next, I explain the methods I used to analyze videotaped episodes of *SportsCenter* to test these hypotheses. I then describe the results of the analysis, and discuss notable aspects of the show relating to the audience, regular news, and the anchors themselves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication Studies in Sports on Television

For nearly half a century, television has brought sporting events to the homes of millions of Americans. Most of the communication studies have analyzed actual game broadcast footage, looking at the phrases used by commentators (e.g., Brummett & Duncan; Bryant, Comisky, & Zillman; Morris & Nydahl; Wanta & Leggett). The reason these studies looked at sports events is because of the genre's continuing growth on television:

The amount of television time given to sports broadcasts is sufficient reason for more precise study of presentations of these events; indeed, the recent emergence of a network devoted solely to sports coverage indicates that the importance of this genre in the lives of a large percentage of the viewing public is likely to increase. (Morris & Nydahl 195)

As an experience, sports are enormously popular and "reflective of our culture" (Brummett & Duncan 232). The first study of sports on television by communication scholars was in 1977 by Michael Real.

Sports and the electronic media have had an intricate bonding since the 1950s. Times have changed from the first AFL-NFL Championship Game (now called the Super Bowl) in 1967

to Super Bowl XXXI in 1997. In 1977, Real asked "Why is the Super Bowl the most lucrative annual spectacle on American media?" (207). He answered the question with the following:

The Super Bowl combines electronic media and spectator sports in a ritualized mass activity; it structurally reveals specific cultural values proper to American institutions and ideology; and it is best explained as a contemporary form of mythic spectacle. (207)

Here was an analysis of a sports program, possibly the largest sports "spectacle" in the world today.

Another study by Comisky, Bryant, and Zillman found that sports commentary can alter perceptions of actions. Observing several ice hockey games on videotape, they noticed that:

"[T]he segment...identified as showing aggressive action contained only a little explicitly violent behavior. The announcers, however, had managed to convince [them] that we were witnessing rough and tough hockey at its best..." (151)

The results of their study showed the commentary greatly influenced viewers' perception of the hockey play (152).

The words used by the people we see and hear on television to "call the game" have been studied to find what attracts fans to watch. Bryant, Comisky, and Zillman also observed six National Football League games to discern that

dramatic features of commentary used by sportscasters (141). Statements from sportscasters are either descriptive, dramatic, or humorous. Dramatic forms could follow team, interpersonal, or intrapersonal respects, while humorous forms could be either derogatory or complimentary (Bryant, Comisky, & Zillman 142-3). They found fifteen dramatistic motifs in the sportscasters' commentary (143), and that nearly one-fourth of the sentences were devoted to either creating an impression of an intense struggle or being funny (144).

In 1983, Morris and Nydahl analyzed live television broadcasts by way of sports events. They sought to "discriminate between, yet interrelate, the two kinds of television 'language'" (195). Using the much advertised 1982 NCAA Division I men's basketball championship game on CBS, Morris and Nydahl transcribed the dialog, codified camera shots, and classified types of commentary (196). They categorized three basic and seven elaborative types of commentary used by the announcers to intensify the dramatic impact of the game (Morris & Nydahl 199-200).

One particular aspect of word usage by sports commentators that has been studied is the use of clichés. Wanta and Leggett noted that "[a]llthough most sports editors and directors ask members of their staffs to avoid using clichés..., clichés nonetheless continue to creep into sports reporting" (Wanta & Leggett 82). They attributed the capacity

theory of attention for this. Wanta and Leggett determined that the degree of upset on a game or the higher the ranking of teams causes announcers to devote more attention to the game and less to originality of their words, resulting in more clichés (Wanta & Leggett 87-88). Wanta and Leggett also used live sports events, namely college football, for their study.

Brummett and Duncan proposed a theory concerning visual pleasures of televised sports (specularity) in 1990, noting features as fetishism, voyeurism, and narcissism. For fetishism, "[t]he discourse of televised sports...functions to sustain desire" (Brummett & Duncan 233), but not all of it can be possessed, so fans want more. Voyeurism is accented by commentators' lack of talking during the unexpected events that come with live television, where the players and coaches act out their roles without realizing they are being watched (Brummett & Duncan 236). Narcissism involves the audience identifying with the people they see on the screen: "Often color commentators, former athletes themselves, speak from the point of view of the competitor, thus enabling us to imagine ourselves in his or her place" (Brummett & Duncan 237).

The preceding research suggests that the words used in sports broadcast commentary greatly impact the perceptions of the viewers. SportsCenter has commentary that makes an impact on viewer perception of sports, as Comisky, Bryant, and Zillmann found in watching hockey and classifying statements

from sportscasters. For my study, classifying commentator statements and transcribing them are a major part in my analysis of *SportsCenter*. As with Brummett and Duncan's idea of fetishism in televised sports, *SportsCenter's* function is to sustain desire.

While past research has focused on actual game action, little has been done on a rapidly growing area on television: sports news. Of course, there was much done for analysis of "regular" news, and the methods used for those could also be helpful here.

Format and Language Analysis of Newscasts

A study by Jensen looked at a nightly news programs from two major networks in 1981. Jensen focused on four elements of the news discourse (actors, agents, coherence, and presuppositions) and classified the stories as "economic" or "political" (12-14). These elements help describe the social universe in terms of how its participants are integrated and should operate (15-18). My thesis does not go into that detail, but it does focus on actors and coherence and classifies stories portrayed on *SportsCenter* in order to relate this to sports news.

Mumby and Spitzack looked at television news with a metaphorical analysis of political stories. From a sample of six political stories, they classified statements into three metaphorical groups, referring to politics as either as a war,

a game, or a drama (Mumby and Spitzack 167). The goal of their study was "to demonstrate that what is seen as real in television news is not wholly external to, or independent of, the way people conceptualize the world" (171). The question for my thesis derives from this: "How does the language of sports news (in this case, *SportsCenter*) characterize the way people see the world?"

METHOD

The artifacts for this study are seven taped episodes of *SportsCenter* from early 1997: January 31, February 5, February 6, February 7, March 19, March 20, and March 21. I timed the episodes to determine the length of each section (including commercial time). *SportsCenter* is an hour-long show, but because *SportsCenter* would be sandwiched between two college basketball games, the actual broadcast time was shorter on some occasions.

Collecting Data on Language

On four episodes, namely January 31 and the three early February episodes, I focused on the type of language used in each story. I classified each highlights' commentary as either "information-giving" or "offbeat." Information-giving means the anchor gives plain facts, with no metaphor or side reference. Offbeat commentary means the anchor has used a

metaphor or side reference with the possible intent to be funny or dramatic. Usually, I considered a comment offbeat if it does not add any information to the highlights being presented, could be substituted by more conventional wording, or is not true but could be discerned as a joke. Here is an example of the difference between information-giving and offbeat commentary:

Information-giving: "Reggie Miller scored 33 points--17 in the first quarter--to lead the Indiana Pacers to a 100-74 win over the Houston Rockets."

Offbeat: "The kind of 23-point loss Louisville had at Temple means two words: 'Hindenburg Disaster.'" or "Remember that the [Saint Louis University] Billikens are named after former St. Louis Cardinals pitching coach Bob Milliken."

I classified statements made during highlights only. Certain features such as "Inside the Huddle," an update on National Football League news, or "NBA Beat," an update on National Basketball Association news, are information-giving only features. Others, such as "Plays of the Week," are solely for the entertainment of the audience, hence they contained mostly offbeat comments. These features appear to be scripted with these intents in mind. Game highlights, however, do not have time to be scripted:

[The highlights supervisor] assigns every scheduled game to an entry-level employee.... They write down key plays on paper, coding them with colored markers, then scurry to an editing room after the game to boil them down to a few seconds of video.... ESPN anchors ad-lib highlights' descriptions from bare-bones "shot sheet" details provided from the screening room. (Hall C-1)

Game highlights and late-breaking news are the bulk of *SportsCenter*, hence this is where I focused on dialogue.

Collecting Data on Format

The second part of the study was charting each episode in order to determine *SportsCenter's* format. Without stopping the tape and using a stopwatch, I noted the times of when each segment began and ended. I then calculated each segments elapsed time. A segment included the following:

- Game highlights for a particular sport (basketball, hockey, etc.). Professional and college levels were treated separately.
- Special Features (e.g., "Inside the Huddle," "Plays of the Week").
- Off-the-field news (e.g., trades, judicial trials).
- Lead-ins to commercials and commercial time.

I finally calculated the amount of time of each block between commercials. This was done to see if the length of each block grew shorter and whether SportsCenter keeps a consistent amount of commercial time.

RESULTS

Format Analysis

The format of SportsCenter begins with a large opening segment that lasts around 15 minutes before the first commercial break. The second segment can last from as short as five minutes to as long as eight minutes. Remaining segments usually last two to three minutes. Commercial breaks are usually 90 seconds. Variations to this scheme depend on the importance of events being presented. Table 3 on the next page shows the segment times for the three mid-March episodes of SportsCenter. Note that March 21 is the late-night/morning edition, while March 19 and 20 are prime time editions.

Commercial time on SportsCenter takes just less than one-fourth the allotted time. The first segment generally is twice the time as any other segment, at least fifteen minutes long. In this segment, all major stories and events of the day are covered. This is convenient for viewers who do not have as much time to watch the whole show.

Table 3.

Segment Times for Three SportsCenter Episodes

	March 19	March 20	March 21*
Segment 1	16:23	15:56	18:24
Segment 2	9:07	5:05	2:33
Segment 3	3:48	3:25	4:14
Segment 4	2:41	5:55	5:06
Segment 5	2:18	3:49	4:18
Segment 6	4:15	3:05	5:19
Segment 7	2:18	3:01	3:56
Segment 8	4:07	2:57	3:05
Segment 9	2:27	1:30	0:35
Segment 10	--	1:44	--
TOTAL	46:30	46:30	47:30
COMMERCIAL	13:30	13:30	12:30

In all seven episodes, the first segment was divided into at least four sports, each lasting no more than five minutes. The only exception in this sample was March 21, where the first 11 minutes of the program was devoted to college basketball because four important games took place in the NCAA Division I basketball tournament. The March 19 episode led

off with the NBA, followed by college basketball, the NHL, the NFL, and the Senior Professional Golfers Association Tour.

Unless a sport had only one or two items for discussion, no one sport was completely covered in one segment. In the three March episodes, NBA highlights were in three different segments. Lead-ins to commercials in previous segments state "More NBA to come," which usually signaled that the next segment would have more NBA highlights.

Features (such as "Dick Vitale's Fast Break" or "Breakdown") other stories (such as the Texas Rangers baseball spring training preview) were reserved for later segments, usually beginning with the fifth segment early in the second half of the show. "Teasers" would start as early as two segments in advance, sometimes in the introduction, as if to create suspense for the viewer that this item will come.

Language Analysis

A total of 244 highlight statements were classified as either information-giving or offbeat. Fifty-six, or 23.0 percent, were classified as offbeat. The results of each of the four episodes are presented in table 1.

The fourth episode (Feb. 7) had only 23 commentary statements to classify. This episode aired on the first day of the NBA All-Star Break, so there were no NBA games that night. There was also only one National Hockey League game, while the rest came from two golf tournaments and a tennis

tournament. The major story of the night was the World Boxing Congress heavyweight title fight between Oliver McCall and Lennox Lewis, which was stopped in the fifth round (while SportsCenter came on the air). This episode did not have much material for game highlights, so there were many feature stories, including previews of the NBA All-Star Game and an exposition on the growing popularity of tattoos on athletes.

Table 1.

Highlight Commentary Classification by Episode

Date	Anchors	IG	OB	% Offbeat
Jan. 31	Karl Ravech/Rich Eisen	59	13	18.1
Feb. 5	Keith Olbermann/Dan Patrick	78	24	23.5
Feb. 6	Keith Olbermann/Dan Patrick	34	13	27.7
Feb. 7	Rich Eisen/Larry Beil	17	6	26.1
TOTALS	5 anchors	188	56	23.0

IG = Information-giving

OB = Offbeat

The third episode (Feb. 6) was sandwiched between two college basketball games, but the first went over SportsCenter's scheduled start. Because of the second game, SportsCenter could not go its full hour, and hence the number

of classifiable highlight statements was less than what could be expected for a full hour show.

I also broke down the numbers for the particular anchors. This was to examine which personalities offered the most offbeat comments on the show. Similar to television ratings, this information is valuable in determining who maintains more viewers. Anchors with a more offbeat sense of humor may be more likable to the viewers.

The February 6 episode had the highest percentage of offbeat comments. This episode was hosted by Keith Olbermann and Dan Patrick. Their February 5 episode ranked third among the four sampled. Both Olbermann and Patrick episodes combined produced an offbeat percentage of 24.8 percent. Episodes with Rich Eisen produced a combined percentage of 20.0 percent, suggesting that Olbermann and Patrick are the duo most given to entertaining, at least in this sample.

Three anchors, Rich Eisen, Keith Olbermann, and Dan Patrick, each appeared in two of the four episodes. Two anchors, Olbermann and Patrick, were together for their episodes. Karl Ravech and Larry Beil each appeared in one episode. The breakdown of each anchor's commentary classification is presented in table 2 (see next page).

I found Keith Olbermann to be the most "offbeat" anchor from the sample, with 30.4 percent of his comments during lighthearted highlights. Rich Eisen was second with 24.6

Table 2.

Highlight Commentary Classification by Anchor

Anchor	# episodes	Info-giving	Offbeat	% Offbeat
Larry Beil	1	8	2	20.0
Rich Eisen	2	43	14	24.6
Keith Olbermann	2	55	24	30.4
Dan Patrick	2	57	13	18.6
Karl Ravech	1	25	3	10.7

percent. Eisen had a different partner in each episode (Karl Ravech in the first and Larry Beil in the second). The combined total for Eisen's partners is 33 for information-giving and five for offbeat, or 13.2 percent offbeat.

DISCUSSION

The section uses the results to look at various aspects of *SportsCenter* that play a part in its popularity. I start with the opening theme and introductions as the way the show grabs the attention of viewers. I then look at the anchors as a comedy team with the comedian and the straight man showing the entertainment value. Part of this lies in the regular phrases the anchors use, as well as improvisation of highlights they have never seen before and word play for

planned expositions. Finally, I look at commentary that is not objective as is expected in regular news programs.

Attention-Grabbing Introductions

The episode-opening introductions usually involve a theme, and the clips of highlights that preview the show relate to this theme. The theme is appropriate to what is popular in the social scene. For example, the opening of the January 31 episode of *SportsCenter* played on the reopening of the *Star Wars* motion picture. Table 4 on the next page is a transcript of the opening, with the on screen action on the left and Karl Ravech's commentary on the right. References to *Star Wars* are in bold type.

Here we see six references to the theme of the introduction, including the opening sentence that tells the audience what the theme is. From there, it is up to the audience to make the connections. Ravech says Olajuwon goes "Solo" against the Pacers, referring to Han Solo from *Star Wars*, although it is doubtful Olajuwon played alone. Buffalo's style of offense in football, named "K-gun" after Kelly, "goes the way of the light saber" because it will no longer exist due to Kelly's retirement. Falling victim to the "Dark Side" and to a bicycle rider's crash on the snowy incline (part of the Winter Extreme Games or X-Games) are made to seem similar.

Table 4.

Transcript of Opening Introduction - Jan. 31 Episode

Pictured on screen	Commentary (Karl Ravech)
\$299 Luke Skywalker figure	Are you getting tired of this <i>Star Wars</i> stuff? Then join us for <i>SportsCenter</i> ...
Houston Rockets center Hakeem Olajuwon has shot blocked by Indiana's Rik Smits	...as Hakeem goes "Solo" against the Pacers.
Minnesota Timberwolves 19-year-old center Kevin Garnett	This guy was just born when the movie first opened.
Charlotte Hornets veteran forward Tom Chambers	He last played when <i>Return of the Jedi</i> came out.
New England Patriots head coach Bill Parcells	Is it on to bigger and better things for Bill Parcells?
Parcells speaking at press conference	<i>Parcells</i> : "If they make you cook the dinner, at least they ought to shop for some of the groceries."
Action film of Buffalo Bills quarterback Jim Kelly	Buffalo's "K-gun" goes the way of the light saber.
Kelly speaking at press conference	<i>Kelly</i> : "I can't think of a person I'd rather put my hands under his butt..."
Hockey player upending an opponent with his stick	Uh, that wasn't meant to be taken literally.
Hockey players and fans pushing each other in the stands	Maybe it would be better to use the "Force"...
Bicycle rider falls as he tries to drive down a snow-covered hill	...otherwise you might find yourself a victim of the "Dark Side."
Actor Joe Pesci grins at the lie of his golf ball	You think that's funny? Funny like how? Funny like <i>SportsCenter</i> ? Next...

In this example, *Star Wars* is used as a theme in the opening because it was at the time a popular discussion topic (produced by the film trilogy's 1997 release to theaters). It could also be an attempt to make a *Star Wars* fan into also a *SportsCenter* fan by creating and relation between the two

shows. By varying the topics and the interests, the introduction can get the attention of a variety of people.

"Tag-Team Partners": Comedian and Straight-Man?

From table 2, Keith Olbermann was rated as having the highest percentage of offbeat comments. His regular partner, Dan Patrick, had the second lowest among the five anchors in the sample. While these two are considered the most potent duo on *SportsCenter*, each has a different persona. Olbermann and Patrick could be considered a comedy team, with Olbermann being the comedian and Patrick being the "straight man." After the opening sequence, Olbermann will introduce the two with "Alongside my tag-team partner Dan Patrick, I'm Keith Olbermann."

Sometimes Olbermann and Patrick will play off each other, like a comedy team. Patrick was once quoted on the team concept:

We have fun. We're not vindictive. It's almost like two brothers. I would say "husband and wife," but my wife is far prettier than that. But I do spend more time with him than my wife. We try to make it seem like two guys just talking about sports. (Kiesewetter)

In the February 5 episode, Patrick's sheet to help him with the highlights apparently was incomplete, which left him with nothing to say:

PATRICK: I'm not exactly sure what happened in those highlights. I only know Toronto won. *(To Olbermann)* You're not sure, either?

OLBERMANN: No! No! You did a great job on that. Geez, I followed that perfectly.

PATRICK: We don't always see these highlights before we go on TV.

The anchors will occasionally play on each other. One scene showed basketball star Michael Jordan dunk with his left hand, prompting Karl Ravech to say, "...then Michael at his best...WHOA! With his left! Rich [Eisen] says, 'Let's see it again.' Rich, here we go." Eisen then replies "Thank you" as they replay the highlight in slow motion. Later, on an atypical goal in hockey, Eisen says, "Karl wants to see it again, so I'll return the favor." Of course, neither anchor has any real control over the replay of highlights, but they will give the impression of helpfulness between them.

Rich Eisen had the second highest percentage of offbeat comments of the five anchors at 24.6 percent. He had two different partners in the sample, one from each episode Eisen anchored. The combined efforts of his partners resulted in 13.2 percent offbeat comments, making the difference between Eisen and his partners about the same as Olbermann and Patrick.

I conclude that in order to attract viewers and keep them, ESPN tries to pair up its *SportsCenter* anchors to create memorable duos similar that of comedy teams (e.g., George Burns and Gracie Allen or Abbott and Costello). Keith Olbermann and Dan Patrick would fit that plan. Rich Eisen might still be a work in progress to find a regular partner for him.

Regular Phrases

Each anchor on *SportsCenter* has developed (whether intentionally or unintentionally) his or her set of phrases used continuously. Viewers can remember these phrases and associate them with a particular anchor.

The two that used phrases most often in my sample were Olbermann and Patrick. Table 5 on the next page shows the action on the screen to the left and the anchor and comment used on the right.

These phrases, which for *SportsCenter* may have become cliché, are expected from Olbermann and Patrick. Bonk interviewed Wanta on his piece about the language of *SportsCenter*. Wanta said, "If you gave viewers a couple of cliché-free reports, they would think the program was too antiseptic, too clean, that the announcers didn't know what they were talking about."

The anchors' use of their own clichés can be tied to Wanta and Leggett's study on capacity theory discussed

Table 5.

Commonly Uses Phrases by Olbermann and Patrick

Basketball three-point shot	Olbermann: "From way downtown...BANG!" or Patrick: "(Player name) for threeee-[high pitch] good!" or "The shot touches NOTHING but the bottom of the net."
Score appearing on screen	Patrick: "(Winning team) had a win by the final OF!...(score)"
Team celebrates too soon	Olbermann: "The (team name) suffer from premature jocularity."
Hockey power-play goal	Olbermann: "It's a powerrr-plaaay goooal."
Hockey player rips a shot past the goaltender	Olbermann: "(Scorer) beats (goaltender) like a rented goalie." or "He puts the biscuit in the basket."
Consecutive highlights of a player performing extremely well	Patrick: "You can't stop (player name), you can only hope to contain him."

earlier. Once an anchor realizes that one of his phrases has become popular, he (or she) may feel public pressure to use the phrase, along with the pressure of live television and the necessity to ad-lib the highlights. In order to devote maximum attention to their work, anchors devote less to the originality of their words and result in using their particular clichés.

Improvisation and Word Play

Beyond the regularly used phrases, *SportsCenter* anchors will be prompted by what is shown on the screen and make up something offbeat to say. It is improvisation in comedic circles, and these comments are unexpected. Some references are vague, while some are more obvious. For example, in a

college basketball highlight of a game featuring large center from the University of Michigan Robert Traylor, Olbermann said, "Inconveniently, Robert Traylor fouled out—or he couldn't find a pair of shorts big enough."

SportsCenter anchors do not ad-lib all highlights. Some are prepared with plays on words that involve alliteration or figures of speech. After the introduction of the January 31 episode, Ravech and Eisen led into their first item:

RAVECH: Ahead on the show, retirements, resignations, a little resentment, some reservations, even a resurrection of sorts, but first Ramadan, of course.

EISEN: ... Earlier in the week, [Houston Rockets forward Charles] Barkley said, "We should beat Denver in the first game. From there on it's going to be tough." Whoops! Chas' "Magic 8-Ball" is in need of repair. The Rockets did not beat Denver on Saturday, despite 40 shots from Hakeem [Olajuwon]. Tonight, the "tough part" began in Indiana...

This sequence begins with Ravech giving word play, previewing the show with words that begin with "r". The last word, Ramadan, which does not relate to the other words, is actually the transition to the first item. Ramadan is the month of fasting practiced by Muslims. The Rockets' Olajuwon is Muslim—and the Rockets are featured in the first item.

Eisen's exposition about the Rockets-Pacers game is highlighted by "Whoops! Chas' 'Magic 8-Ball' is in need of repair," referencing to Barkley's failed prediction that the Rockets would defeat Denver. Here there is an interjection ("Whoops!"), followed by using the short form of Charles Barkley's first name (Chas) and a toy whose premise is to predict the future (Magic 8-Ball).

However, a simpler phrase like "Barkley was wrong" does not tend to hold the audience's attention as well as the more analogous phrasing that Eisen used. In his article about *SportsCenter's* language, Bonk interviewed Dr. Nathan Weinberg of the sociology department at California State University at Northridge. An expert in popular culture, Weinberg said *SportsCenter* is "very now. The colloquial jargon, it's hip in the sense of being current. All the metaphors, that's part of what you're listening for." *SportsCenter*, which tries to keep up with the times, is no longer expected to provide the conventional explanation of its news.

Subjective Commentary

Not all of the commentary on *SportsCenter* is particularly objective, and some anchors have a history of relaying contempt or pleasure of some events. Kindred noticed this when writing his piece:

During the [1994-95] baseball strike, neither Patrick nor Olbermann made much pretense at

objectivity; the phrases "baseball from hell" and "the irregular season" occurred. As owners persuaded the naïve and the desperate to become scabs in the absence of striking major league players, Olbermann's body language of scowls and one-eyebrow-cocked-askance-in-contempt spoke directly to the viewer. ...The scabs were "self-deluding weasels who are taking advantage of other people's pain."

Instances of opinion-dropping occurred in my sample. One such instance was by Olbermann in the February 6 episode, where in the highlights of the college basketball game between Saint Louis University and the University of Louisville, there was a box graphic in the lower right corner which contained the score. Also in this box was a McDonald's logo. Olbermann said, "Will you take that off there, please? ... I'm hungry. Eat something. You know you can't leave a logo there the entire flippin' game." Beyond the idea of the logo being too large was Olbermann's thought that the logo was a symbol of the over-commercializing of sports.

Eisen also had an opinion comment in a lead-in to commercial. In the next segment, *SportsCenter* was to have the latest information regarding the upcoming Mike Tyson-Evander Holyfield boxing match. Eisen finished the lead-in with, "Let's get ready to bleed the boxing fans!" Eisen's comment

was criticism of the overpricing of tickets and pay-per-view television broadcasting of world heavyweight boxing title bouts.

CONCLUSIONS

My sample of *SportsCenter* episodes showed 23 percent of highlight commentary to be offbeat, or have language that had an entertainment element beyond giving information. This was less than my hypothesis estimate of one-third, but this shows a cushion between entertainment and information for maintaining credibility. However, this percentage should be noticeable by anyone who watches the show.

Some anchors had higher offbeat percentages than others. Anchors acted as teams, with one having a higher offbeat percentage, like a comedian, than the other, like a straight man. At times, anchors play off each other to create an open atmosphere.

SportsCenter uses introductions that involve a particular theme, and it is the connection of this theme to the highlights about to be presented that grab the viewer's attention. To maintain this attention, anchors resort to regular phrases (*SportsCenter's* in-house clichés), improvisation, and word play. Sometimes, however, the language does not provide a totally objective view of the news presented.

The format of *SportsCenter* has a long opening segment (so viewers have time to settle in) which takes at least fifteen minutes and spots the major happenings in all major sports. The remaining segments are much shorter, and the lead-ins to commercials "tease" the fans of particular sports to stay tuned for the entire show to get all the information. Features and other stories are aired in the second half hour, but viewers are reminded in the first half of their coming. The dividing of any sport's news into pieces spread along the show supports my format hypothesis.

The limits of this study are that it can not generalize the results for the full spectrum of media. It involves a genre of television-sports news on an all sports cable network-that is relatively small in size with the rest of television's content. The language style and format may differ from those for "regular" news media, perhaps because of the entertainment aspect involved. However, this study determines what format and language strategies *SportsCenter* uses to draw even the more casual sports fan.

This study analyzed episodes of the sports news program *SportsCenter* to study functions of language, structure, and format. I found that the less serious nature of sports makes for a different type of news program. Indeed, future studies could observe various types of sports news programs for the strategies they use in gathering and maintaining an audience.

SportsCenter, in its 18 years, is the prototypical sports news television show. While on the outset it looks like it has the features of a "regular" news show, analysis proves otherwise. Its lighthearted way of showing the world through sports accounts for its popularity. Olbermann states, "Sports are, whenever possible, ...to be enjoyed. There is enough grim news" (Bonk).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Journal Studies

- Brummett, Barry and Margaret Carlisle Duncan. "Theorizing Without Totalizing: Specularity and Televised Sports." Quarterly Journal of Speech 76 (1990): 227-46.
- . "Toward a Discursive Ontology of Media." Critical Studies in Mass Communication 9 (1992): 229-49.
- Bryant, Jennings, Paul Comisky, and Dolf Zillmann. "Drama in Sports Commentary." Journal of Communication 27.3 (1977): 140-49.
- Comisky, Paul, Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann. "Commentary as a Substitute for Action." Journal of Communication 27.3 (1977): 150-53.
- Jensen, Klaus Bruhn. "News as Ideology: Economic Statistics and Political Ritual in Television Network News." Journal of Communication 37.1 (1987): 8-27.
- Morris, Barbra S. and Morris Nydahl. "Special Reports: American Broadcasting I. Towards Analyses of Live TV Broadcasts." Communication Studies 34 (1983): 195-202.
- Mumby, Dennis K. and Carole Spitzack. "Ideology and Television News: A Metaphoric Analysis of Political Stories." Central States Speech Journal 34 (1983): 162-71.
- Wanta, Wayne and Dawn Leggett. "Hitting Paydirt: Capacity Theory and Sport Announcers' Use of Clichés." Journal of Communication 38.4 (1988): 82-89.
- Palmgreen, Phillip and J.D. Rayburn, II. "A Comparison of Gratification Models of Media Satisfaction." Communication Monographs 52 (1985): 334-46.
- Real, Michael R. "The Super Bowl: Mythic Spectacle." Television: The Critical View. Ed. Horace Newcomb. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1982. 206-39.

Articles Regarding SportsCenter

- Antonen, Mel. "TV Sports - An Inside Look at TV Sports Programming." USA Today 14 Dec 1994.

Bonk, Thomas. "The Center; It's ESPN, Where Irreverence Means It Must Be 11 O'Clock." Los Angeles Times 21 July 1996, Bulldog ed.: C-1.

Kiesewetter, John. "Getting the Highlights on the Air is More than a Game for ESPN." Gannett News Service 28 Mar 1996: S12.

Kiesewetter, John. "Meet Dan Patrick." Gannett News Service 15 July 1996: S11.

Kindred, Dave. "This TV Tag Team Is Loads of Fun." Los Angeles Times 7 May 1995, Bulldog ed.: C-1.

Episodes of SportsCenter

SportsCenter. With Rich Eisen and Karl Ravech. ESPN. 31 Jan. 1997.

SportsCenter. With Keith Olbermann and Dan Patrick. ESPN. 5 Feb. 1997.

SportsCenter. With Keith Olbermann and Dan Patrick. ESPN. 6 Feb. 1997.

SportsCenter. With Larry Beil and Rich Eisen. ESPN. 7 Feb. 1997.

SportsCenter. With Larry Beil and Keith Olbermann. ESPN. 19 Mar. 1997.

SportsCenter. With Rich Eisen and Keith Olbermann. ESPN. 20 Mar. 1997.

SportsCenter. With Kenny Mayne and Stuart Scott. ESPN. 21 Mar. 1997.