

# WHOSE WORLD CUP?



Rajesh Jantilal/African Media Online

## JOURNALISM AND THE MEDIA-SPORT-CULTURAL COMPLEX

THE INTERLOCKING OF SPORT AND THE MEDIA – FORMERLY TWO VERY SEPARATE INSTITUTIONS – HAS HAD COMPLEX CONSEQUENCES FOR BOTH INDUSTRIES, SOME OF WHICH ARE POTENTIALLY DAMAGING, WRITES JANE DUNCAN



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**N**ext year, South Africa will host the Fifa World Cup. Promises abound about the development benefits for South Africa. According to the Department of Home Affairs, between 450 000 and 500 000 visitors are expected, although the global recession may result in fewer people attending than expected (Webb 2008).

In view of the anticipated visitor influx and the global media coverage of the event, the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) has declared the World Cup “a communication opportunity of a lifetime”, and identified as its key communication objectives “African solidarity, national development and improved international image” (GCIS 2009). The government has also stated its commitment to use the event to turn several South African cities into world-class cities in the eyes of the global community, which should have tangible long-term benefits.

These ambitious objectives are not surprising: mega-events such as World Cups have long been recognised as spectacular opportunities for global image enhancement of the host cities and countries (Newton 2009: 95). Global sporting events attract huge media attention, but what are the consequences for sport and journalism, of the mediatisation of sport? And are national development and global image enhancement actually compatible objectives?

The interlocking of two formerly separate institutions – namely media and sport – has had complex consequences for both industries. David Rowe has used the term media-sport-cultural complex to describe the integration of industries that were able to supply each other synergistically with important benefits (Rowe 2006: 2-3).

The danger of these developments is that the media, sporting associations, sporting businesses and even governments may become interlocked in a web of interests that may damage the integrity of sport and journalism. Some sports organisations even own their own public relations companies and their own media, and media organisations and sports organisations may even share owners, which may marginalise traditional journalism as teams and organisations succumb to the temptation to control what is said about them.

Controversially, some sports organisations have also attempted to restrict the flow of information about major games.

Investigative journalism on controversies involving powerful figures in sport may become a difficult undertaking, and a fear of risk taking and even self censorship may set in. Nigerian sports journalist Olukayode Thomas, who has investigated stories such as drug scandals, the misappropriation of athletes’ allowances and bonuses, controversies around the appointment of coaches and age cheats among athletes, knows these pressures all too well; he has been subjected to many forms of pressure, and even threats (Thomas 2002).

Close associations with official sources may lead to sweetheart journalism, especially if such journalism is rewarded with financial incentives. Sports journal-

ism also runs the risk of evolving towards entertainment and away from news.

Universal access to sport is also an increasingly controversial information society issue. Some of the more popular sporting codes and major global events are being moved onto conditional access systems, and sports rights are becoming increasingly unaffordable for smaller commercial and public broadcasters. In fact, sports rights have become one of the biggest drivers of inflation in programming. As a result, public broadcasters are struggling to offer sport as part of their full-spectrum programming.

The mediatisation of sport may also reinforce a masculine sporting culture, with codes involving women receiving scant media attention. An international survey on sports press coverage across 10 countries revealed that the print media cover a narrow range of mainly male sports (Schultz-Jorgensen cited in Rowe 2006: 12-13). Sports that build a range of socially important skills and that do not lend themselves easily to commercialisation – like martial arts, volleyball and table tennis – can all too easily fall below the radar of media coverage.

Another consequence of sport mediatisation is that a host country’s need to project a positive global



image may trump national development priorities, with the possible contradictions between the two objectives receiving scant attention in government and media discourse. The standard line is that mega-events will generate benefits that will have long-term positive impacts on host countries.

According to John Nauright, there has been a tendency on the part of the government and the media to present the nation and the world “in union”, in an attempt to gloss over troubling questions about spending priorities (Nauright 187). For example, in an interview with Deutsche Welle, Ndivhuwo Mabaya, a spokesman from South Africa’s Ministry of Housing





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and Human Settlement stated that the new infrastructure will boost the economy and improve the lives of the poor as well (Hauschild 2009).

Yet the true development value of mega-events has become a sore issue in many host countries. The crowding in of investments around stadiums can lead to the crowding out of investments in more distant areas. Jobs that are created may be temporary, casual and low-paid.

Huge investments may be made in facilities that are barely used afterwards (Newton 2009: 94-98). When global sporting events come to town, they can lead to gentrification, as well as forced removals of

poor and homeless people, many of whom may be criminalised through the promulgation of loitering and begging by-laws and the creation of vagrant-free zones.

In preparation for Atlanta's hosting of the Olympic Games, 68 000 people were evicted. People residing in public housing were gradually displaced by private developments, with insufficient compensation.

Some journalists, especially those in the non-credentialed press, however, decided to look beyond the hype and cover the real stories of communities affected by Olympic developments. As Olympic scholar

Helen Lenskyj has argued, "the Olympic Games have always been a bad thing for the region that hosts them. They involve massive long-term changes to regional infrastructure to accommodate a two-week influx of tourists and athletes... the whole agenda is dominated by multinationals" (Lenskyj in Beaty 2007: 18). Yet these stories were few and far between as the overall trend in media coverage was towards the promotion of the games, which became projected as a patriotic duty (Beaty 2007: 17).

Such contradictions are becoming evident in

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South Africa in the build-up to 2010. Shack-dwellers in Durban’s Kennedy Road have been resisting a Slums Bill that they say will be used to “cleanse” the area of slums ahead of 2010 (Dardagan 2007). In September 2008, hundreds of Nelspruit schoolchildren toyi-toyi’d outside the 2010 stadium in protest against being evicted from their school, which was earmarked for demolition to make way for a stadium parking lot, and be replaced by makeshift sheds. Pupils became ill from the oppressive learning conditions (Khoza and Mogakane 2008).

In Cape Town, plans to fight the housing backlog by developing a flagship project along the N2 gateway, which links the airport to the city, have been criticised as a strategy to hide the visibly obvious poverty along this route during the World Cup (Newton 2009: 93-108). The project involves massive slum eradication and the construction of more attractive housing, which in the first phase of development has been unaffordable for Joe Slovo informal settlement residents.

Shack-dwellers have been forcibly removed to transit camps far away from the city centre, leading to additional hardships and the erosion of social networks (Chance, Huchzermeyer and Hunter 2009): a measure that has now unfortunately been given a respectable face by the Constitutional Court in their judgement on the latest evictions. In view of these development, assurances by Tokyo Sexwale, the Minister of Housing and Human Settlement, that no evictions will take place in the build-up to 2010, ring hollow.

As Garry Whannel has argued, mega-sports events can become a media vortex, or a focal point around which many issues converge (Berger 2008). Journalists will need to be sensitive to these story opportunities, especially stories that explore the tensions between the promises and the reality in light of experiences with global mega-events.

For instance, the World Cup could be used to confront Africa’s peripheral status in world football (Desai 2008: 329). The promise of new media is that it can provide a voice for sporting codes that do not receive much coverage in traditional media. The fandom attached to sport is one of its greatest potential strengths, as fans can be engaged easily through social networking tools. There is scope for fans to become citizen journalists, creating blogs, podcasts and tweets about sporting codes that do not receive much mainstream media attention. Controversial issues can find their way into the public domain more easily.

Sport brings nations together in ways that no other activity does: to this extent, it has an amazing galvanising effect. This is especially so with soccer in South

Africa, which enjoys popularity as the sport of choice of the working class. It can lead to far more genuine reconstructions of national identity than those achieved by post-1994 rugby or cricket.

Yet it is also important to bear in mind Eusebius McKaiser’s recent warning that celebrations around sport (including soccer) risk creating a false impression about the state of wellbeing of the South African nation, and an unsustainable definition of national unity (McKaiser 2009). Evictions, warped spending priorities, and the like are the other side the coin of the national miracle that is the 2010 World Cup; they are the realities that tend to jar with celebrations of national unity so readily apparent at these events. Disparities within and between sporting codes, that tend to map over onto race, class and gender divisions, are national questions too in that they raise questions about the depth of our national unity.

Rowe has argued that “contemporary sport is in urgent need not of more public relations, but of greater public and professional scrutiny” (Rowe 2006: 16). Yet it is precisely this form of journalism that is increasingly endangered in the media-sport-culture nexus. The main challenge for professional journalists – irrespective of their medium – is to tell the story of the world cup with integrity.

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