Profile of Sports Section and Sport journalism Practice in Malaysian National Newspaper: Focus on Malay Language Print Media

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Abstract

Most of newspapers in Malaysia have its own sport sections or sports column. Newspaper industry views sport section as a strategy and value added for improving readership and circulation of their publications. Thus, the study shows sports journalism practice is very important to give strength to the newspaper sports section in Malaysia. This study focuses on sports journalism in Malaysia with a focus on the newspaper sports section, the sports journalism practices, as well as factors and the importance of the newspaper sports section to Malaysian national newspaper. Content analysis method was used to study the newspaper sports section from the two leading media organizations, namely Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian. Media economic theory is used as the framework of study. The results show the prevailing imbalance of information published in the newspaper sports section. The news of international sports and overseas athletes are given more space than local news in the Malaysian newspaper sports section. Advertisements are also found to have considerable influence on the newspaper sports section. The element of contiguity or proximity (events that occur close to the reader) is not a priority element in sports news. The study also found that in order to ensure the survival of newspapers through advertising revenues, the media would give priority to advertising space. The results reveal that sports section need to sacrifice space to advertisements, and this creates constraints for sports news in the sports section. Qualitative findings showed that sports editors or sports journalists in Malaysia do not have an ethical sports journalism guidelines or codes of practice as being practiced in the West. Thus, the daily practice of sport journalism ethics are based on their own judgments and their professionalism as a reporter. The study found that all newspaper editors believed that a sports section is a must in a newspaper due to its attraction and followers, which is capable of generating advertising revenue and increasing newspaper circulation. This study also shows that placement of news and articles of sport in the sport sections is based on the media economic fundamentals which focuses on newspaper market and advertising revenue. Newspapers sport section has also succumbed to the modern theory of journalism as a result of the competition of the sports information through the invention of the new media.

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Key words: Profile, Local media, Newspaper, Sports journalism practice, Readership, Media economic

Introduction

Sports, media and the community have a close relationship. Sports require media for dissemination of information and publicity while sport provides information to the media. The theory of Maslow states entertainment is one of the needs in human life. Media and
sport have the ability to meet this basic needs. The entertainment value of sports displayed to
the public through the media.

According to Kinkema (1998) and Rowe (1999) the audience and readers of the
sports media are constructing with images and sports information according to the
requirements of the needs of media ownership. The definition of the readers and viewers of
sports media content is also based on content displayed by this group. Kinkema and Rowe
argued that the media ownership have a role in determining the content of the media.
However the different situation may arise in the media industry in Malaysia. Therefore, this
study looks at the profile of sports section and sports journalism practice in Malaysian.

Literature Review

All major daily newspapers making sport stories as a regular newspaper column since
three decades ago (Mustakim, 2010). Why are sports space became a regular newspaper
column? According to Baron (2004), a sports column, content and consistent media
coverage of sports is able to provide sports development profile and major athletes, creating a
'role model, increasing the amount of readers and viewers, create positive interest toward
sport and provide opportunities for more sponsorship in sports. These aspects encouraged
newspaper editors in the West to provide more sports space with more pages to the readers.

The question is, does the same situation happen in the newspaper industry in
Malaysia? The world's leading sports championships often produced information widely in
the local daily newspaper. The popularity and the image of sports Championship were
formed as a result from the focus of the media towards the tournament /Championship.
In this aspect, does the editor of the local newspaper sports columns have a special Justification
in making a decision on the content of the newspaper's sports section respectively? If Yes,
what is the justification used in determining the content of free space in each newspaper?

The aspects of ownership has also been identified to see its influence towards the
practice of sports journalism in Malaysian media. Studies done by several other researchers,
also revealed that the society looked at the media as a dissemination of information and bias
existed in the information (ASNE, 1999).

Studies done by several other researchers, also shows the society looked at the media
as bias in dissemination of information (ASNE, 1999; Petterson and Donsbach, 1996;
Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman, 1976). The Media is said to be favoured at certain parties
in its information delivery. It can be concluded that information obtained from bias sources
and variations to meet the need of readers cause the contents of the newspaper to be biased.
The tendency of the media focusing on foreign sports news causes the contents of the
newspaper sports columns to be unbalance. In these aspect, do Malaysian national media is
also follows the same rhythm of market needs and influenced by the needs of readers? This
question will be discussed in the finding of this study.

Media "bias" can also be referred to describe the attitude of media editors and reporters in
presenting sport information or sports news in their media. It includes in the selection of an
event (events) and how news of the event has been reported. This is because, anything
published by the media is under the influence and control of those who work in a newsroom
as editor, sub-editors and reporters. Research on the practice of Journalism will allow
researchers to see whether the influence and control of the media people affect the content sports section in Malaysia national newspaper.

Therefore, the use of the word biased reporting is something that effect toward the practice of journalism and journalism ethic. The direction and degree of media bias in most of the countries are still in dispute even if it causes the deficiencies in terms of practical and theoretical in the content of the news media. The newspaper in Malaysia is likely to use a similar approach in determining the content of the sports section. Detailed study allowed researcher to analyze the content of Malaysian national newspaper.

Collins (2006) in the Journal of Medicine and Social Science explains the impact of media on the audience or readers is complex. According to him, the bias in media reporting or the contents will affect the readers or viewers. The media impact is divided into four, which are giving information, agenda setting, framing and influence or persuade readers.

Baron (2004) in the research entitled "Persistent Media Bias" states media organizations will be able to control media content through the its silence control or by giving proper consideration before any information has been published to the community. He explained that the control of news and tolerance towards bias will enable the media organization to improve profitability. He also said that low quality of news will make the price of the publication is getting low. In addition he stated that bias will be existed more, if there is monopoly in the ownership of media organizations. This allows the individual to fully control on media content and cause a tendency to biased results.

To understand the content of media, the form of the sports section in printed media, the type of media, who is responsible for the content of media and other questions that related to media, we will face a variety of different answers to the questions which describes a variety of assumptions on how communities and individuals function in a society. In this aspect, LaRose (2004) in his book "the Media Now. Understanding the Media, Culture and Technology "explains when a media analysis is made, social behavior (social action) or human behaviour theory are formed and they are known as media theories. Relevant theories are helping researchers understand the media around us and explain how our response to the media (LaRose, 2004).

Therefore, in understanding the profile of the sports column in the national newspaper of Malaysia, it is very important to understand the role of the media, the purpose of the contents of a column in the media, the main focus of the media, the layout, the images and illustration that published in the media, as well as factors that led to the existence of the elements. So it's very important to use various theories to explain the issue that has been discussed in this research. As stated by LaRose (2004, 33) "Theories help us understand the media around us and how we respond to them". For this research, the theoretical concept of news and newspapers and media theory are used to describe the profile of the sports section as well as factors towards the existence of sports section in Malaysian national newspaper namely Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian.
Objective Of Study

1. To identify the format or profile of the sports section in national daily newspaper.
2. To determine the importance of newspapers to publish sports stories.
3. To identify the criteria used by the newspaper in determining the content of the newspaper sports section.
4. To examine the sports journalism practice among the sport journalist in Malaysian national media.

Methodology

Samples: *Utusan Malaysia (UM)* and *Berita Harian (BH)*.

Method:

*Content analysis* sports section in *Utusan Malaysia (UM)* and *Berita Harian (BH)* for 12 months. 48 copies of the UM press and 48 script BH (July 2011-July 2012) used as a review. Instrument form which consists of 56 items was used for content analysis.

*Qualitative method* – face to face interview with the editors of mass media and editorial departments of sports section (sports editor, Assistant sports editor, sports reporter). 4 editorial staff from UM 4 editorial staffs of BH were selected as respondents.

Interview questions were designed to obtain desired information. Both methods are used to strengthen the results.

Finding

Profile of Sports Section

Data analysis shows the profile of the sport section in both newspapers were based on modern sports journalism, which focus towards economy and the media market. There was no significant difference in terms of the content of the newspaper sports columns of UM or BH.

Both papers focus on a wide range of sports information that can expand to readers and advertisers as well. The news value of "proximity" is not given into consideration in determining the content of the sports section. The press has more focused to sports information that may create the interest of readers and give commercial values to them.

Sports news writing is the most prominent information in the sports section (32.6%) followed by other sports information (diary sports, statistics, tables) 29.9%, advertising by 28.8% and sports feature writing show the lowest percentage at only by 8.7%. Both newspapers, organizations, give more space for current news of sports. Other preferences information is seasonally according to the current state of sports in Malaysia and internationally. Both newspaper are focusing toward sport stories that have the ability of creating competition with other newspapers.
For the whole pages of newspaper, UM allocated 13.92% and BH 14.46% of the sport page. UM give higher focused on international sports stories (52.3%) than local sports (47.7%). This is contrast with BH which is giving more focus for local sports stories (51.1%) than international sports 48.9%.

There are 19 types of sports information that covered by a newspaper which including sports issues (regarding training, salaries, drug use and so on) in the newspapers surveyed. The highest five of most coverage sports are football, sports issues, badminton and tennis. Football is the dominant sport, which recorded the highest coverage which is 13.9 per cent, followed by badminton and sports issues by 8.9 percent and tennis by 8.1 per cent.

The advertisement is also dominated sports section of the UM and BH. This situation exist because advertising is an important element for increasing the revenue of the newspaper company. The percentage of ads in UM is 28.3% and BH is 29.4%. This situation clearly supports the opinion of Real (1998) which stated the primary push factor in the sports media is to make profits, sponsorship, expand the market for goods and competition. Sports section has been commercialized by a media organization with the purpose of generating income. Results showed that both newspapers willing to publish any kind of ad in the sports section. Ads which is not related to sport is 67.4% and 32.6% of sports-related ads.

Data finding from this study shows bias of coverage in term of gender. Data shows that both newspaper gave more coverage for men athletes which is 49.2% and women athletes (33.7%). Coverage for the sport that involves both gender is only 17.1%. Although the sports involved in both genders, men are still the main focus and the dominant in the local newspaper.

This in line with the opinion of Boutiller and San Giovanni 1983; Daddario 1994; Matheson and Flatten, 1996 that stated media see women athletes don't have the news value than men. This supports the opinion of Michael Fancher, executive editor of The Seattle Times that competition in the media in the 1990s resulted in the media are not able to continue traditional journalism in total and need to shift to modern journalism by continuing competition and finding ways to increase the daily income (Schor 1992; Coen 1992).

To increase sales, readers and advertisers, both newspapers are willing to give more space and coverage for foreign sports stories and international athletes and teams (UM 56.9% and 51.3% BH). This factor has been deflecting elements of traditional news value (proximity). The media economy in this context successfully shifting away the traditional patterns of information and news.

**Sport Journalism Practice in Malaysia**

The significant role played by sports section is the attraction to some newspaper readers. Almost all major newspapers in Malaysia (whether large-sized newspaper or tabloid) provide sports section in their newspapers. In the opinion of Respondents 1 (UM), the sports section has been able to attract readers around the age of 18 – 40 years.

This is in line with the view of Four (2004) and Coakley (2005) that says the main attraction of newspaper contents in addition to the aspects of politics, economy and education is sports. According to both researchers, sports titles are searchable by newspaper readers. Favored sports are able to provide information in the form of entertainment to the readers compared to other topics in the newspapers.
According to respondent UM and BH, their newspaper also displays sports stories that can sell newspapers to readers. They are free to choose sports information to be published. However, sports editor had to choose sports stories that can create interest to readers, selling newspapers and are able to attract advertisers as required by their organizations. Results of interviews reveal, editor of sports had to face constraints in the sports section. Everyday, ads space will get place in newspaper section before news stories and this is the policy of both newspapers. In this situation, sports page give way to layout of ad space in advance prior to the layout of the sports stories is the daily practice of UM and BH.

**Sport Journalism Ethic**

Respondents from both newspapers agreed that journalism ethics are the most important element in their journalism practice. They must have knowledge of games or sports, honesty in reporting, understand the emotions of athletes and sports fan enthusiasts, and proper ethics in reporting.

This does not mean that reporters need to be a member of the sports organization or association. Respondents also said that they had not been exposed to the practice of violating ethics such as bribery when carrying out their duties. They are always being professional in order to obtain the best information for news coverage. The current practice of getting a free item or gifts is not considered as a deflection in the sports journalism practices.

It is a common practice for every organizer of sports events in Malaysia to provide gifts for Malaysian media who do coverage for their event. This is in line with the Canada Ethics Sport Policy compiled by Gary Sosniecki, editor of sports, Southern Illinoisan in 1979 (Garisson, 1985), which saying “granting of a souvenir, and the use of journalist pas for coverage, is not considered a breach of ethics for sports journalism”.

Significant

There are three major significance of this study:

1. Can be used to provide guidance to enhance the standard of sports journalism practice in Malaysia.
2. These findings could add media practitioners' knowledge of the weakness issues in sport section and journalism practices.
3. The UM newspaper has used the finding from this study for improving the newspaper sports section. As a result, the newspaper has appointed columnist to write articles/analysis related to current sports issues for the newspaper

**Conclusion**

Media organization policy, environment (advertisers) and journalism ethics are very important in the shaping sports journalism practice in Malaysia. Sport Editor should consider this factor as there are distinctive influences that affect the content of sport section and sport journalism practice in Malaysia. Newspapers have to give more coverage for local sports events in an effort to build interest and trust among local sports fan. The allocation of ads needs to be reviewed so more space can be allocated for sports stories and sports news.
Malaysian Press perceived foreign sports news has more news value than local sport news. The perception of Malaysian sports journalists are in line with Stepp (1991) which states that the newspapers in the world, whether the newspaper industry is small or large have been reshaping news by giving the reader controlling the content of newspapers. Both newspaper organization (UM and BH) believed that Malaysian sports fan are more interested toward foreign sports especially football. This perception actually drive the contents of sports section in Malaysian national newspaper indirectly has been controlled by readers (consumer). The newspaper industry, in the situation of generating income and facing with the needs to increase the income of its organization have to follow media economic practice. The practice of media economy in media industry, which focusing toward market value and demand of consumer will affect the contents of newspaper sports section and need to be reduced to ensure the quality of the Malaysian newspaper sports section.

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