

It's Only a Game, Let's Leave Politics Out of It: Mega-Sporting Events, Broadcasting Rights, and Network News Bias

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The question guiding our project is whether corporations' broadcasting rights to mega-sporting events influenced the degree of critical coverage of the events reported by their respective networks' news divisions. The question is answered through a content analysis of NBC, ABC, and CBS evening news coverage of the men's 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics, both held in Brazil, examining the quantity and content of reports highlighting the controversial features of these two major events. The data suggest that broadcasting rights may influence the quantity and quality of critical coverage; however, this relationship does not apply uniformly across networks. The findings have important implications for the capacity of comprehensive and critical coverage provided by some network news divisions while not undermining the financial interests of their corporate owners.

Keywords: ownership, bias, network news, broadcasting rights, sports journalism

On June 17, less than two months before the start of the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Governor Francisco Dornelles declared a "state of public calamity." Rio, along with most of the country of Brazil, was in a financial crisis that put its commitments to properly hosting the Olympic Games in peril. Rio alone was \$5.5 billion dollars in debt (BBC News, 2016). Some hospitals were shut down, other essential public services were rationed, and public workers were not paid as the state of Rio requested emergency funds from the federal government. Olympic tourists were greeted at the airport by police officers protesting over not being paid. Several of the protesting officers held "Welcome to Hell" signs, warning that they could not guarantee visitors' safety (Watts, 2016). One Brazilian commentator referred to the events leading up to the Rio Olympics as "an unnatural disaster" because such drastic actions are usually enacted "for an earthquake or a flood. But the Olympics are a man-

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made, foreseeable, preventable catastrophe" (Barbara, 2016, p. SR1). Brazil's bleak situation prompted journalist Dave Zirin (2016) to note that the real Brazil was in stark contrast to the one represented by the American corporate media during the games. This dichotomy between representation and reality serves as a springboard for this article.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the relationship between the financial interests of corporate media owners and news bias. The question guiding the project is whether corporations' broadcasting rights to mega-sporting events influenced the coverage of the events by their respective networks' news divisions. Do news divisions serve as de facto public relations firms for their corporate parent companies when it comes to covering controversial political issues about the sporting event that they have the exclusive rights to broadcast?

A content analysis of NBC, ABC, and CBS network news coverage of the 2014 FIFA World Cup² and the 2016 Summer Olympics, both held in Brazil, helps answer these questions examining the quantity and content of news reports highlighting the controversial features of these two major events. ABC held the broadcasting rights to the 2014 FIFA World Cup, whereas NBC was the broadcaster for the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics. CBS, in contrast, did not have any exclusive financial interests in the broadcast of either event. The data suggest that broadcasting rights may influence the quantity and quality of critical coverage; however, this relationship does not appear to apply uniformly across networks. The findings have important implications for the capacity of comprehensive and critical coverage provided by some network news divisions while not undermining the financial interests of their corporate owners.

We join Boyle (2006) in calling on scholars of political communication and media studies to take sports and sports journalism more seriously. Though sports can at times be, as Boyle (2006) puts it, "trivial and unimportant," in many cases sports are "a symbolically significant cultural form that is an indicator of wider social and cultural forces in society" (p. 13). Although this analysis speaks directly to prominent theories and analyses within this sports journalism literature, the implications of our findings also extend far beyond the sports arena. The premise that the financial interests of media conglomerates may, at times, shape the news produced by their respective outlets has a logical basis. And there abide several anecdotes that proponents of this argument can call on to provide evidentiary support. However, there remains a paucity of systematic, empirical analyses of this question. Moreover, the limited analyses that do exist tend to focus on news specific to policy and politics.

This study adds a new dimension to this line of inquiry by demonstrating that the potential for financial interests to shape the news content that media conglomerates produce may be far ranging. This study also contributes to broader literatures related to news production, journalism, and particularly media bias, by identifying and leveraging a unique opportunity to expand empirical insight into the shape and form that media bias may take and by providing a viable, robust model for conducting such an analysis.

² Please note that the 2014 FIFA World Cup refers only to the men's national team competition.

Previous Literature on Corporate Ownership and Bias

Our area of inquiry deals with the intersection of corporate ownership and news bias, interested in what informs the mechanisms of, as Dunaway (2013) puts it, "economic driven news behavior" (p. 25). The tension between the public and private functions of the U.S. press is well established. An uncomfortable dichotomy exists in most news organizations between the necessity to earn profits and the desire to fulfill civic obligations that are safeguarded under the U.S. Constitution (Patterson, 2013; Picard, 2005). In addition to its unique constitutional protections, the U.S. press is an outlier among most advanced democracies because the private sector, led by large corporate conglomerates, controls the overwhelming majority of the media that are consumed by American audiences (Picard, 2005). This finding has prompted scholars and policy makers alike to question whether the integrity of the press is compromised by profit-driven corporations, particularly when the interests of the business are in conflict with the public interest. Additionally, the degree to which the financial interests of these corporations may influence news coverage is, according to Bailard (2016), "troublingly broad." Concurring, Picard (2005) asserts that the commercialization and ownership concentration of the media are not as concerning as much as that "there are more and more commercial firms operating for profit that are willing to overtly act in their own self-interest" (p. 343), regardless of the impact on the public good. What is at stake here, Gilens and Hertzman (2000) contend, is the possibility that "a press that systematically slants the news to further its own business objectives threatens to undermine the very foundations of democracy" (p. 383).

A confluence of factors informs the news process. For one, news outlets are subject to market forces. Research suggests that the profit motive, informed by advertising revenue, significantly drives the news process (Baker, 2001; Hamilton, 2004). However, traditional news outlets engaged in accountability journalism—like the three networks examined in this article—are more likely to allow professional norms to dictate news judgments over immediate profit calculations, compared to other formats such as tabloid or entertainment news (Entman, 2005). Professional norms do temper the profit motive. Still, the profit motive is a formidable force and "drives the brand location and decision about a day's news content and style" (Hamilton, 2004, p. 24). Thus, there is a dynamic interplay between the profit motive, advertising demands, and journalistic values. Summarizing the literature, Bailard (2016) states that

the incentives to create coverage that is favorable to the interests of the media owners is likely the result of journalists' incentives to weigh the preferences of their profit-maximizing owners (both explicitly and implicitly) as well as the preferences of their advertisers. (p. 589)

Scholars have offered a variety of ways to examine corporate ownership and its relationship to bias in the news. For example, Gilens and Hertzman (2000) assess ownership influence based on "issues for which different media owners have different interests" and "whether news content differs in accord with those differing interests" (p. 371). We take the same sensible approach in this article because "it is rare when the interests belonging to this handful of corporations vary from one another in clear, systematic, and measurable ways" (Bailard, 2016, p. 586). Given that the three networks operate in the same market and institutional and journalistic context, it is reasonable to assume that broadcasting

rights function as a significant factor in guiding coverage of the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics. These two major global sporting events offer us one of those rare opportunities to investigate the degree to which corporate interests—in this case, broadcasting rights—influenced the content and tenor of news divisions' coverage.

The literature is clear that the financial interests of corporate media owners can skew the output of the news. However, scholarship on ownership and news bias is limited in one sense in that it has focused primarily on traditional political topics—be they elections (Dunaway, 2008, 2013; Dunaway & Lawrence, 2015), public policy (Bailard, 2016; Gilens & Hertzman, 2000), or international affairs involving the United States (Chomsky, 1999, 2000; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Kennis, 2015). This project makes a unique contribution to the literature by expanding the scope of inquiry in a novel way through the examination of the politics of two major global athletic events. To paraphrase Gilens and Hertzman's (2000) assessment of news coverage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, we determine whether the three major networks slanted coverage to serve the interests of their corporate parents rather than the interests of their viewing public in their coverage of two important megaevents and their implications not only for Brazil but also for future host countries. To put it another way, did the three networks provide, as Rowe (2007) put it, "challenging, critical, socially responsible sports journalism," or did they adhere to the "toy department" (p. 387) stereotype of disengaged, apolitical content that relegates sports reporting to its lowly status both within and outside of the news profession (see also Boyle, 2006)? Ultimately, the question is whether broadcasting rights had a significant impact on the networks' abilities to adequately represent the "two Brazils," one that is host to multiple megaevents and "another that is mired in structural injustice" (Bailey, Oliver, Gaffney, & Kolivras, 2017, p. 73). The findings of this analysis suggest that broadcasting rights can influence the degree of critical coverage.

Hypotheses

We argue that financial incentives seep into and shape news coverage of events that have implications for the network's parent corporation's bottom line. We argue that this is a result of both implicit and explicit calculations made by journalists and editors regarding the preferences and financial interests of both their profit-maximizing corporate owners and their advertisers (Baker, 2001; Epstein, 1974; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Hamilton, 2004; McManus, 1995). Although the range of issues and events that may affect news corporations' finances is presumably broad, the number of opportunities to conduct empirical tests of this argument is often constrained by the fact that it is unusual when the financial interests of news corporations deviate from one another in clear, consistent, and measurable directions. Fortunately, the ownership of broadcasting rights of high-profile events provides one of these rare opportunities.

In this specific case, we are further advantaged by the fact that both the World Cup and the Olympics took place in the same country, Brazil, within a relatively narrow window of time, which means that these two events were plagued by virtually the same sets of political issues, concerns, and circumstances. We are additionally advantaged by the fact that different networks held the broadcasting rights to the two events—with NBC holding the broadcasting rights to the Rio Olympics and ABC holding the rights to the FIFA World Cup. Moreover, including CBS in the analysis provides a useful point of comparison, as it did not hold the broadcasting rights to either event.

Our contention that the financial interests of news corporations would lead a network broadcasting a particular high-profile event to minimize negative coverage is derived from assumptions supported in the literature. First, a broadcasting network will not want to alienate potential viewers by highlighting the negative effects of these events on the host country. They also would not want to risk alienating segments of their potential audience by casting doubt on the integrity of the event itself (in terms of the fairness of the competition) or on the integrity of the event's athletes or officials. For example, if a competition is believed to be rigged, how invested can audience members be in the outcome of that competition? What is the point of watching? In line with this reasoning is the viewpoint that "conspiracies to predetermine contest outcomes kill which distinguishes sport from other entertainment . . . Such a match is not a sport but show business, and an affront to the moral sensibilities of the spectator" (Quinn, 2009, p. 179).

Another assumption we make is that networks prefer to appeal to and appease advertisers (Baker, 2001; Hamilton, 2005; McManus, 1995), and advertisers have a clear preference that their commercials be associated with content that is of "lighter fare," as opposed to content that may be construed as dark or difficult by audience members (Anderson & Coate, 2000; Brown & Cavazos, 2005; Sunstein, 1999). Thus, potential advertisers may harbor concerns that negative coverage of an event and its impact on vulnerable populations in the host country could elicit a sense of unease among certain audience members in the form of cognitive dissonance among those who feel conflicted about the event. Thus, if an event is portrayed as mired in controversy, if the fairness of the event's competitions or integrity of officiating is called into doubt, or if the harmful implications of that event for local populations are highlighted, it is possible that advertisers may deem that event as too dark or difficult and, thus, not offer attractive advertising space.

Accordingly, we predict that a content analysis of the news coverage of these two events aired by NBC, ABC, and CBS will yield the following findings:

- H1: News programs featured more coverage of the event that their network held the broadcasting rights to compared to an event it was not broadcasting.*
- H2: News coverage of the Olympic Games by NBC (event broadcaster) was less negative than the coverage produced by the two nonbroadcasting networks, ABC and CBS.*
- H3: News coverage of the World Cup by ABC (event broadcaster) was less negative than the coverage produced by the two nonbroadcasting networks, NBC and CBS.*
- H4: News coverage of the Olympics by NBC (event broadcaster) was less negative than its coverage of the World Cup (as a nonbroadcaster).*
- H5: News coverage of the World Cup by ABC (event broadcaster) was less negative than its coverage of the Olympics (as a nonbroadcaster).*
- H6: Holding broadcasting rights to neither event, CBS news coverage of the World Cup was commensurate in its degree of negativity with its coverage of the Olympics.*

Method

Utilizing LexisNexis's archive of broadcast news transcripts, we compiled transcripts of stories about the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics aired on the network evening news programs belonging to NBC (*Nightly News*), ABC (*World News Tonight*), and CBS (*Evening News*). To ensure that the story was primarily about the event itself, we limited the search to stories that mentioned the name of the event in the transcript's headline or lead. This approach also ensured that the stories include some content about the events themselves beyond merely summarizing or reciting the outcomes of that day's competitions. For the Olympics, the names we searched for included "Olympics" and "Summer Games," and for the World Cup, the names included "World Cup" and "FIFA." We also required that the terms "Brazil" or "Rio" be mentioned at least once at any point in the transcript to ensure that the stories were about the 2014 World Cup or the 2016 Olympics in Brazil, as opposed to stories about past or future events held in other countries.

For each event, we searched for stories that were aired during a period of exactly seven years, beginning with the day of the official announcement that each event would be hosted by Brazil through about three months after the conclusion of each event. (We opted to extend the window past the conclusion of the events to ensure that the searches would capture retrospective stories about the events and their impacts after they ended.) For the World Cup, this time frame reaches from October 30, 2007, to October 30, 2014, and for the Olympics, the time span begins October 2, 2009, and ends October 2, 2016.

After the transcripts were compiled, one of the authors scrubbed the transcripts of all identifying information—including show names, networks, and the names of any anchors, reporters, or correspondents. These names were all replaced by generic identifiers (e.g., Network 1, Network 2, Show 1, Newsperson 1) before coding commenced, which would ensure that the coders could not be alerted to which transcript was broadcast by which network, an essential component of maintaining coder objectivity.

The codebook was compiled by the authors and a graduate research assistant by perusing other types of coverage of these events (such as stories published by newspapers and online news sites) to identify the main political criticisms, concerns, and critiques of the events or their impacts on Brazil. Briefly, these negative implications include the misuse of public resources; inhumane or unsafe working conditions; forced housing evictions or relocations; economic recession or other negative effects on national economy; the threat of Zika; terrorism threats or concerns; political instability or law and order concerns in Brazil related to the events; Brazil's being unprepared or behind schedule in providing the necessary logistics for hosting the event; non-Zika health threats to competitors, attendees, or journalists; and mentions of possible corruption or cover-ups that cast doubt on the integrity of the event itself, its athletes, or members of its organizing body. We also included a code for "other" to catch any additional negative implications not otherwise captured by our codebook.

Several pilot tests employing transcripts of the networks' morning news programs were conducted to strengthen the codebook and establish strong intercoder reliability. After this process, the

two coders (one author who neither conducted the search nor scrubbed the transcripts, to remain blind to which stories were aired by which network) and the graduate student coder (who was also blind to the network origin of the stories) independently coded 82 of the evening news transcripts, constituting approximately 45% of the total number of broadcast transcripts included in this analysis ($n = 184$).³

Results

Beginning with H1, we simply compared the number of stories aired about each event by the broadcasting network with those from each of the two nonbroadcasting networks. As Table 1 reveals, for both the World Cup and the Olympics, the broadcasting network (ABC and NBC, respectively) aired nearly twice as many stories than the two nonbroadcasting networks.

Table 1. Number of Stories About World Cup and Olympics Aired by Each Network's Evening News Program.

	NBC	ABC	CBS
World Cup	14	22	14
Olympic Games	67	35	14

Although this finding supports our first prediction, it is also worth noting that this finding might alternatively be explained by simple logistics. Because it is broadcasting the event, that network also has substantially more presence in Brazil and, thus, has more resources on the ground to report stories relevant to that event.⁴

Complicating our findings with H1, we compared the number of stories aired by the three networks prior to the events. Concurrent with the first hypothesis, we expected that the event's broadcaster would air more stories than the two nonbroadcasters. NBC, as the broadcaster of the Olympics, aired slightly more than 50% of all stories among the three networks before the start of the games, meeting our expectations. ABC, on the other hand, failed to meet our expectations, as it did not air the most stories prior to the start of the 2014 World Cup, despite being the event's exclusive broadcaster. NBC aired nearly 64% of the segments among the three networks prior to the start of the World Cup, whereas ABC aired only 18% of the stories.

³ Please see the Appendix for the specific codes and their respective intercoder reliability scores. Please see the supplementary appendix

(<https://smpa.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2046/f/Broadcast%20Rights%20and%20News%20Bias%20-%20IJoC%20Supplementary%20Appendix.pdf>) for the codebook in its entirety.

⁴ Another possible explanation for this finding is access to newsworthy visual material. In other words, the nonbroadcast rights networks may lack copyright access to visual material, thus limiting their ability to report about the event. Our thanks to one of the reviewers for making this point.

To test H2 and 3, we use likelihood-ratio chi-squared tests comparing the number of stories that mention each of the specific negative implications of the events included in the codebook (and in the "other" category). We also conducted Pearson's chi-squared tests and *t*-tests comparing aggregate measures of the presence (or absence) of negatives mentioned in the stories aired by the broadcasting network's news program versus the nonbroadcasting networks' news programs (pooled). These aggregate measures included the percentages of all stories aired by each network that did not mention any negative implications of the event at all and the mean number of negative implications mentioned per story for the broadcasting network relative to the nonbroadcasting networks.⁵

The results of the tests of 2, beginning with the individual codes (i.e., specific negative implications mentioned in a story), there are no significant differences between how NBC (event broadcaster) covered the Olympics versus how ABC and CBS covered it. Moreover, as Table 2 shows, there are several negatives that NBC mentioned more frequently than the other networks. Interestingly, this finding runs contrary to our prediction; however, these differentials do not reach statistical significance.

Table 2. Likelihood Ratio Chi-squared Tests Comparing Mentions of Specific Negative Implications of Olympics in Network News Programs.

Topics mentioned in coverage	Nonbroadcaster	Broadcaster	Likelihood Ratio χ^2	<i>p</i> -Value
	ABC & CBS (<i>n</i> = 67)	NBC (<i>n</i> = 67)		
Misuse of national public resources				
Percentage of stories	3	3		
Number of stories	2	2	.00	1.0
Adjusted residual	.0	.0		
Inhumane/unsafe working conditions				
Percentage of stories	0	0	-	-
Number of stories	0	0		

⁵ Likelihood ratio chi-squared tests are appropriate for the analysis of the specific codes because they permit a comparison of the coverage produced by the broadcasting network of the event to that of the two nonbroadcasting networks (pooled). This type of test is also appropriate for the binomial distribution of the dependent variables in these tests, which are binary measures that denote either the presence or absence of specific negatives (i.e., codes) in the stories. Additionally, likelihood-ratio chi-squared tests are preferred to Pearson's chi-squared tests in this case because of the relatively small values of the expected cell frequencies of the specific codes (i.e., there are small expected frequencies in the contingency tables for several of the individual codes). For the tests of the aggregate measures, however, we use Pearson's chi-squared to compare the number of stories with no negatives mentioned at all (because of the multinomial distribution of this dependent variable and the larger expected cell frequencies for this measure) and a two-tailed *t*-test of the mean number of negatives mentioned per story for the broadcasting versus nonbroadcasting networks (because of the continuous distribution of this dependent variable).

Adjusted residual	-	-		
Forced housing evictions or relocations				
Percentage of stories	3	1.5		
Number of stories	2	1	.35	.56
Adjusted residual	.58	-.58		
Economic recession or other negative effects on national economy				
Percentage of stories	1.5	4.5		
Number of stories	1	3	1.08	.3
Adjusted residual	-1.02	1.02		
Threat of Zika				
Percentage of stories	18	16		
Number of stories	12	11	.05	.82
Adjusted residual	.23	-.23		
Terrorism concerns				
Percentage of stories	6	5.5		
Number of stories	4	3	.15	.7
Adjusted residual	.39	-.39		
Political instability or law-and-order concerns in Brazil				
Percentage of stories	7.5	15		
Number of stories	5	10	1.9	.17
Adjusted residual	-1.37	1.37		
Brazil is unprepared/behind schedule				
Percentage of stories	4.5	6		
Number of stories	3	4	.15	.7
Adjusted residual	-.39	.39		
Non-Zika health threats to competitors, tourists/attendees, or journalists				
Percentage of stories	13.5	12		
Number of stories	9	8	.07	.8
Adjusted residual	.26	-.26		
Corruption and cover-ups				
Percentage of stories	19.5	16.5		
Number of stories	13	11	.2	.65
Adjusted residual	.45	-.45		

Random public relations disasters				
Percentage of stories	13	10.5		
Number of stories	9	7	.29	.6
Adjusted residual	.53	-.53		

Turning to the aggregate measures, the average number of total negatives mentioned per story is no different for NBC, CBS, and ABC. However, the difference between the percentage of stories aired by NBC that do not mention any negatives at all compared with the percentages of stories aired on the other two networks does run in the direction predicted by our hypothesis. As Table 3 demonstrates, 45% of NBC's stories about the Olympics mention no negatives at all, whereas only 31% of the ABC and CBS stories (pooled) mention no negatives at all. This difference just misses statistical significance; however, at $p = .10$ ($p \leq .11$). This means that, across both the individual measures and aggregate measures, there is limited evidence that NBC covered the Olympics decidedly less negatively than the two nonbroadcasting networks, contrary to our expectations.

Table 3. Tests Comparing Aggregate Measures of Negativity in Network Coverage of Olympics.

Aggregate measures of coverage	Nonbroadcaster	Broadcaster	Pearson's χ^2	p -Value
	ABC & CBS ($n = 67$)	NBC ($n = 67$)		
Stories with no negatives mentioned (χ^2 test)				
Percentage of stories	31	45	2.57	.11
Number of stories	21	30		
Adjusted residual	-.16	1.6		
Average negatives mentioned in story (two-tailed t -test)				
Mean	.9	.9		1.0
Standard error	.11	.14		

As for H3, the analysis reveals significant differences between how ABC (event broadcaster) covered the World Cup versus how NBC and CBS covered it in regard to three of the specific codes. ABC was significantly less likely to air stories that referenced misuse of public resources, political instability or law-and-order concerns, or Brazil being unprepared or behind schedule. Of note, there is one code that ABC was more likely to mention than the other networks—corruption or cover-ups associated with FIFA or the World Cup. However, there are also several additional negatives that were mentioned less often by ABC than the nonbroadcasting networks, but these differentials just miss statistical significance. Thus, on the whole, ABC was markedly less likely to mention several of the negatives associated with the World Cup than the other networks, as predicted (see Table 4).

Table 4. Likelihood Ratio Chi-Squared Tests Comparing Mentions of Negative Implications of World Cup in Network News Programs.

Mentioned in coverage	Nonbroadcaster	Broadcaster	Likelihood Ratio χ^2	p-Value
	NBC & CBS (n = 28)	ABC (n = 22)		
Misuse of national public resources				
Percentage of stories	25	0	9.01	.003
Number of stories	7	0		
Adjusted residual	2.53	-2.53		
Inhumane/unsafe working conditions				
Percentage of stories	7	4.5	.15	.7
Number of stories	2	1		
Adjusted residual	.38	-.38		
Forced housing evictions or relocation				
Percentage of stories	4.5	0	1.18	.28
Number of stories	1	0		
Adjusted residual	.9	-.9		
Economic recession or other				
Percentage of stories	4.5	0	1.18	.28
Number of stories	1	0		
Adjusted residual	.9	-.9		
The threat of Zika				
Percentage of stories	0	0	-	-
Number of stories	0	0		
Adjusted residual	-	-		
Terrorism concerns				
Percentage of stories	4.5	0	1.18	.28
Number of stories	1	0		
Adjusted residual	.9	-.9		
Political instability or law and				

Percentage of stories	32	9		
Number of stories	9	2	4.12	.04
Adjusted residual	1.95	-1.95		
Brazil is unprepared/ behind				
Percentage of stories	21	0		
Number of stories	6	0	7.6	.006
Adjusted residual	2.32	-2.32		
Non-Zika health threats to				
Percentage of stories	7	0		
Number of stories	2	0	2.38	.12
Adjusted residual	1.28	-1.28		
Corruption or cover-ups				
Percentage of stories	0	13.5		
Number of stories	0	3	5.17	.02
Adjusted residual	-2.02	2.02		
Random public relations				
Percentage of stories	0	4.5		
Number of stories	0	1	1.67	.2
Adjusted residual	-1.14	1.14		

Regarding the aggregate measures, Table 5 reveals that the difference in the average number of total negatives mentioned in the stories between ABC and the other networks is quite large, statistically significant, and runs in the direction that our hypothesis predicts. However, we do not find a significant difference between the percentage of stories that do not mention any negatives at all. (Although not significant, it is worth noting, substantively, that there is a modest difference that does run in the direction that our hypothesis predicts.) Overall, these findings provide strong support for Hypothesis 3.

Table 5. Tests Comparing Aggregate Measures of Negativity in Network Coverage of World Cup.

Aggregate measures of coverage	Nonbroadcaster	Broadcaster	Pearson's χ^2	p-Value
	NBC & CBS (n = 28)	ABC (n = 22)		
Stories with no negatives mentioned (χ^2 test)				
Percentage of stories	65	73		
Number of stories	18	16	.4	.53
Adjusted residual	-.64	.64		
Average negatives mentioned in story (two-tailed t-test)				
Mean	1.04	.32		
Standard Error	.31	.12		.05

For H4 through H6, we test only the aggregate measures of the degree of negativity featured in each network's news coverage of the two events. The rationale motivating this approach is that, although both events were plagued by a nearly identical set of criticisms, it would be imprudent to expect that the same negative implications applied equally or were equally salient across both events. Moreover, such an expectation potentially constructs an easily refutable argument for the analysis, which presents the risk of generating significant differences in the findings that are not actually attributable to whether a network is broadcasting a given event, but more likely attributable simply to the passage of time and the resulting changes in circumstances. Therefore, it is more judicious to test aggregate measures of the degree of negativity portrayed by each network's coverage of each event as a whole, as this is a more difficult test and is a more valid test in light of the temporal dimensions inherent to this analysis.

In this case, there is virtually no difference between the average number of total negatives mentioned per story aired by NBC in its coverage of the Olympics versus its coverage of the World Cup. As for the difference between the percentage of stories that do not mention any negatives, the direction of the difference between NBC's Olympics coverage versus coverage of the World Cup moves in the expected direction of our hypothesis (45% of its stories about the Olympics do not mention any negatives, versus 36% of its World Cup stories); however, this difference does not reach significance (please see Table 6).

Table 6. Tests of Aggregate Measures of Negativity in NBC's Coverage of the Olympics to NBC's World Cup Coverage.

Aggregate measures of coverage	Nonbroadcasting	Broadcasting	Pearson's χ^2	<i>p</i> -Value
	Event World Cup (<i>n</i> = 14)	Event Olympics (<i>n</i> = 67)		
Stories with no negatives mentioned (χ^2 test)				
Percentage of stories	64	45	1.77	.18
Number of stories	9	30		
Adjusted residual	1.33	-1.33		
Average negatives mentioned in story (two-tailed <i>t</i> -test)				
Mean	1	.9		.39
Standard error	.44	.14		

In summary, there is no significant difference in the aggregate measures of negativity of NBC's news stories about the Olympics (which it was broadcasting) versus NBC's stories about the World Cup (which it was not broadcasting).

Next, our tests of H5 reveal large differences, both substantively and significantly, between ABC's coverage of the Olympics, which it was not broadcasting, and its coverage of the World Cup, which it was broadcasting. Beginning with the difference between the percentage of stories that do not mention any negatives at all, only 37% of ABC's stories about the Olympics did not mention any negatives, whereas a whopping 74% of its World Cup stories contained no negative mentions. The same is true of the average number of total negatives mentioned per story—this average was much lower for ABC's coverage of the World Cup versus its coverage of the Olympics (please see Table 7.)

Table 7. Tests of Aggregate Measures of Negativity in ABC's Olympics Coverage to ABC's Coverage of the World Cup.

Aggregate measures of coverage	Nonbroadcasting	Broadcasting	Pearson's χ^2	p-Value
	Event Olympics (n = 35)	Event World Cup (n = 22)		
Stories with no negatives mentioned (χ^2 test)				
Percentage of stories	34	73	7.99	.005
Number of stories	12	16		
Adjusted residual	-2.83	2.83		
Average negatives mentioned in story (two-tailed t-test)				
Mean	.8	.32		.02
Standard error	.13	.12		

In summary, there are large and significant differences in ABC's World Cup coverage compared with its coverage of the Olympics, and these differences run in the direction predicted by our hypothesis.

Last, the findings generated by our tests of H6 reveal that there is one sizeable difference between CBS's coverage of the Olympics and its coverage of the World Cup (CBS held broadcasting rights to neither). Similar to ABC's distribution of coverage, the percentage of CBS's stories that do not mention any negatives at all is much lower for the Olympics (28%) than for its coverage of the World Cup (64%). However, it is worth noting that there is no difference between the average number of negatives mentioned per story in CBS's coverage of the Olympics versus its World Cup coverage. This finding suggests that, although CBS aired a larger percentage of World Cup stories that avoided mentioning any negatives at all (similar to ABC), when a CBS story about the World Cup did mention any negatives, the number of negatives mentioned by CBS story was quite large (dissimilar to ABC). Essentially, when CBS went negative about the World Cup, it went very negative in terms of the sheer number of negative implications presented in a given story. Additionally, the average number of negatives mentioned per story was similar for CBS's coverage of the Olympics and its coverage of the World Cup, suggesting relative consistency in its coverage of the two events. Therefore, although there is only mixed support for this hypothesis, it appears that CBS's coverage of the World Cup versus its coverage of the Olympics was relatively commensurate, particularly in comparison to ABC's coverage of these two events (please see Table 8).

Table 8. Tests of Aggregate Measures of Negativity in CBS's Coverage of the Olympics to CBS's Coverage of the World Cup.

Aggregate measures of coverage	Nonbroadcasting	Broadcasting	Pearson's χ^2	p-Value
	Event	Event		
	Olympics (n = 32)	World Cup (n = 14)		
Stories with no negatives mentioned (χ^2 test)				
Percentage of stories	28	64	5.35	.02
Number of stories	9	9		
Adjusted residual	-2.31	2.31		
Average negatives mentioned in story (two-tailed t-test)				
Mean	1	1.07		.86
Standard error	.18	.45		

Discussion and Conclusion

We find mixed support for the expectation that corporations' broadcasting rights to mega-sporting events skewed the coverage of their respective networks' news divisions. On the one hand, both broadcasters to the World Cup (ABC) and the Summer Olympics (NBC) found these events more newsworthy compared with the nonbroadcasters. On the other hand, the financial interests of broadcasting rights seemed to only inform ABC's coverage of the World Cup whereas NBC, as the broadcaster of the Olympics, largely failed to conform to the expectations found in scholarship on ownership and media bias. In a little more detail, save for its finding the Olympics more newsworthy than the two nonbroadcasters did, the absence of a positive slant in NBC's coverage is substantiated relative to two other points about its coverage: (a) its own reporting on another event (i.e., the World Cup) that it did not broadcast, and (b) how nonbroadcasting networks reported on that same event (i.e., the Olympics). The opposite is true of ABC. Across these same two points of comparison, ABC's coverage of the World Cup was slanted decidedly in favor of the event that ABC owned broadcast rights to, as predicted by our hypotheses.⁶

⁶ Additionally, we ran tests comparing the average number of negatives mentioned per story before and after each event. We find that ABC's coverage does not conform with that of the other networks in how it compares to NBC's coverage of its own event, how NBC and CBS covered the World Cup, and how ABC covered events before the Olympics. Each of these findings mirrors our larger findings regarding a positive slant by ABC in its coverage of the event to which it had the broadcast rights. Please see Tables 9 and 10 in the supplementary appendix for the results of these tests.

One potential explanation for the apparent absence of slant in NBC's coverage of the World Cup versus that of the Olympics arises from consideration of the temporal dimension of this analysis. Seeing that NBC already knew that it would be broadcasting the 2016 Olympics in Brazil when it was reporting on the 2014 World Cup, there may have been an incentive to downplay negativity in its coverage of the World Cup in an effort to favorably set the stage for its subsequent broadcasting event, the Olympics. This would explain the commensurate aspect of our findings: the similarity in the tone of NBC's coverage across these two events, suggesting that profit motives may have, in fact, played a role in how NBC reported on these events after all. However, a profit motive should also encourage NBC to largely shy away from negativity in its coverage of both events. Instead, NBC's coverage of both events revealed some willingness, albeit moderate, to highlight the negative aspects of these events (particularly relative to ABC), which returns us to our original conclusion—NBC's coverage of these events did not closely conform with its corporate owner's financial interests, contrary to predictions. Only additional research will satisfactorily begin to shed light on the complexities revealed by the findings.

A related inquiry is the relatively modest degree of critical coverage across all three networks, despite the multitude of political controversies that plagued these megaevents. All three networks were relatively sparing in their emphasis of the more sordid aspects of the World Cup and the Olympics in Brazil. For example, the majority of coverage across the three networks made no negative mentions of the 2014 World Cup. Though there was more criticism of the Rio Olympics—reaching majority of coverage for ABC, NBC, and CBS—the proportionality of negativity was modest, as evidenced by the mean average of negatives mentioned per story. Scholarship on sports journalism provides helpful explanations for why these patterns persist throughout coverage.

Sporting megaevents are both a global commercial enterprise and a form of media entertainment, and the tension between these two factors, explains Boyle (2006), "helps shape the parameters within which contemporary sports journalism operates" (p. 92). A clear consensus in this literature, as the title of our article implies, is that the financial links between megaevents and news outlets invite the latter to downplay the politics that inevitably inform these global sporting spectacles (Boyle, 2006; Lenskyj, 2016; Rowe, 2007, 2012). Our findings support previous research that shows there is little interest in covering sports through a political, social, or economic lens, opting instead for a "routinely neutral" approach to mega-events (Rowe, 2007).

Sports journalism has long been considered the "toy department" of the news media, held in low regard both within and outside the profession because of its focus on seemingly trivial matters (Boyle, 2006; Rowe, 2007). Research shows that the political economy of sports is underreported or receives superficial treatment (Boyle, 2006; Boyle, Dinan, & Morrow, 2002; Rowe, 2007). Sugden and Tomlinson (2007) observed that much of what qualifies as sports news "is at best trivial and at worst little short of advertising" (p. 44).⁷ Boyle (2006) also notes that investigative reporting lacks a strong tradition in this field. It is "largely peripheral" (Boyle, 2006, p. 120) in the realm of sports journalism. Likewise, "critical investigative

⁷ Another significant factor contributing to the depoliticized coverage of mega-events is the narrowness of the sources journalists rely on to frame sports stories (Boyle, 2006; Boyle, Dinan, & Morrow, 2002; Rowe, 2007; Sherwood, Nicholson, & Marjoribanks, 2016; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2007).

journalism," Sugden and Tomlinson (2007) contend, "is not the forte of most sports journalism" (p. 58). In other words, investigative and critical reporting are the exception, not the rule, in sports journalism.⁸ This finding leads Boyle (2006) to rhetorically ask "if sport is simply a wing of a global, commercial entertainment industry, then should we surprised if sports journalism begins to have much in common with its related journalisms in the showbusiness arena?" (p. 126).

The problem is not limited to sports coverage. "In the age of promotion and media manipulation," argues Boyle (2006), "the challenge to produce uncomplacent sports journalism is, in many ways, simply an extension of those faced by journalists in other spheres of journalism" (p. 127). This is why it is imperative, according to Rowe (2007), that sports reporting "cannot be quarantined from the requirements of critical investigation because of its popular cultural object" (p. 386). Accordingly, we reiterate the call for journalism and political communication scholars to strongly consider incorporating sports news into their research. For example, the quantity and tenor of the sports media's reporting on the politically charged controversy surrounding NFL players' national anthem protests during the 2017 season, and the degree to which that coverage may have been shaped by their network's financial links to the NFL, stands out as one potential avenue to continue such a research agenda. On a related note, in addition to taking sports and sports journalism more seriously, we urge scholars to consider merging media ownership and news bias with the increasingly important role of social media and the ever-shifting political economy landscape of the news media. For example, President Trump took to Twitter to denounce NFL players' kneeling during the National Anthem, and his tweets spurred more news coverage. Moreover, we suggest examining the influence that corporate interests have on sports coverage in political opinion media outlets such as Fox News. In addition, we encourage scholars to investigate how the sports divisions of these news-network conglomerates cover the politics informing their own events (e.g., ESPN's reporting on the World Cup) compared with their rivals' events (e.g., ESPN's covering a Fox Sports event).

Outside of sports journalism scholarship, the tendency for evening news programs to increasingly favor soft news over hard news over recent decades, as market competition increased and audience preferences changed, may also help to explain this pattern of coverage (Hamilton, 2004). Research suggesting that TV coverage, especially coverage from corporate-owned TV stations, is less substantive than newspaper reporting also provides support for this finding (Dunaway, 2008). In addition, investigative news stories about sports "tend to be broken by the print media, and then picked up and developed by the broadcasters" (Boyle, 2006, p. 70). Anecdotally, most of the critical coverage we used to construct the codebook for this study was supplied by newspaper stories, not broadcast reports, provides support for this assessment.

Another point worth revisiting is that our endeavor to empirically measure slanted news coverage that correlates with the financial interests of news corporations—in this case, reporting on events for which a network does or does not own broadcasting rights—does not compare the content of the actual stories aired to some sort of unknown, ideal measure of what truly "objective" or "unslanted" coverage of these

⁸ Though Boyle's (2006) claim was made in the context of UK sports journalism, it is applicable to U.S. sports reporting given that mega-events and the media are financially interlinked (e-mail correspondence with R. Boyle, October 14, 2017).

events would look like. The reason for this approach is simple: This ideal objective measure simply does not exist in reality. In its absence, the best alternative available is to compare actual content produced by news outlets on issues and events in which those outlets and their respective parent corporations' bottom lines are clearly and measurably affected in different directions.

By comparing the content of news produced about specific events, across which broadcasting rights varied both by networks and events, we were able to execute a sound empirical test of the potential for financial incentives of news corporations to slant the news coverage that they produce. Although our analysis did reveal a strong positive slant in ABC's coverage of the World Cup, to which it held the broadcasting rights, across two different points of comparison, we did not find as much evidence of a similar slant in NBC's coverage. Our findings both expand, and complicate, the broader literatures on news bias, news production, sports journalism, and journalism studies more broadly. We hope that future research will continue this line of inquiry by seeking out novel opportunities to empirically test the degree to which the financial motivations belonging to news corporations may seep into and slant the content produced by their news outlets.

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Appendix

Table A1. List of Codes and their Intercoder Reliability Scores.

Codes Representing Specific Negatives Mentioned in News Coverage of the Events	Agreement (%)	Cohen's κ
Misuse of public resources	97.56	.8441
Unsafe or inhumane working conditions	100.00	1
Forced evictions or relocations	100.00	1
Economic recession or other negative effects on national economy	97.56	.4875
Threat of Zika	98.78	.9454
Terrorism threats and concerns	97.56	.6555
Political instability or other law and order concerns	97.56	.9185
Brazil is unprepared or behind schedule	98.78	.9165
Other (non-Zika) health threats to competitors, attendees, and/or journalists	98.78	.9405
Corruption or cover-ups that cast doubt on the integrity of the event itself or its athletes	97.56	.9024
Random public relations disaster	98.78	.9267
No negatives mentioned in story at all	96.34	.9259