

Mediated Violence: The Case of State of Origin Rugby League¹

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The Maroons and the Blues, the Cockroaches and the Cane Toads, are more than footballers when they enter the Lang Park or SCG colosseums.

With 30 000 baying spectators urging on their home team the players become modern-day gladiators. Backed to the hilt by pro-Maroon Lang Park supporters the Queensland side become the Goliaths, the underdog New South Welshmen a team of Davids. In Sydney the opposite applies. Sometimes Goliath slays David, sometimes Goliath bites the dust . . .

Unprecedented interest in interstate league has spawned an industry that turns over millions . . .

Through gate takings, sponsorships, television rights, advertising, licensing rights and player payments, State of Origin has generated a financial monolith.²

The above passage typifies many of the emotive and allegorical features of media coverage, particularly in the sports press, of the massively successful State of Origin rugby league series (referred to as Origin from this point) from 1980 until 1997, when the split of rugby league into two competitions diminished the importance of Origin. Since its inception, the annual three match representative series between the best players from the Australian states of Queensland and New South Wales has grown from modest beginnings to be arguably Australia's most popular televised sporting event.³ As indicated by the preceding quote, this 'financial monolith' draws on long-held interstate rivalries between Queensland (Qld) and New South Wales (NSW), and is often framed by the mass media as a form of sporting civil war. The war is fought out on the football field — the 'colosseum' — with players represented as hyper-masculine 'gladiators' defending their state's honour before partisan spectators 'baying' for the opponent's 'slaying'. It is hardly surprising

that player violence is celebrated as a substantial and defining feature of Origin rugby league.

Origin's unique position in the rugby league calendar saw the media playing a central role in its presentation and continuing popularity. Undeniably, thousands more read about and watch the interstate series than attend the matches. For example, in 1993, 113 418 spectators attended the three games,⁴ as compared to around 600 000 people reading about them in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Australian*, and *Courier-Mail* the day after each game,⁵ and approximately 2.5 million people viewing the series on television in Sydney alone.⁶ Origin's position as a premier sporting media event infers that media interpretations of the matches are virtually as important as what actually happens on the field. After all, it is the media that provides key interpretive frameworks for the construction of meaning⁷ in sport by spectators, competitors, and administrators.. Several important issues arise from this: what patterns and themes emerge from competing sports media discourses?⁸ What are the associated narratives⁹ framing Origin rugby league? What role does the media play in the construction and circulation of meaning in social life? How has the media contributed to the structure, perpetuation and modification of cultural and social meanings of player violence within Origin football? This article will address such questions.¹⁰ It will be argued that the texts offered by sports journalism have been largely overlooked in formulating critical analysis of sporting historical and social relations. Issues to be raised include the interdisciplinarity of the cultural studies approach, the media-sport production complex, the militaristic framing of Origin competition, and the relationship between gender and rugby league violence.

Cultural Studies and Interdisciplinary Concerns

Several sports theorists¹¹ have implemented and contributed to the field known as 'cultural studies'.¹² According to Stuart Cunningham, cultural studies is not an established *discipline*, but more *an approach* or *tradition* inviting critical analysis, and suiting an interdisciplinary method.¹³ In essence, its main concern is with analysis of the cultural production of everyday life, mainly in developed Western capitalist society, and central to this, determining the media's role in this production.¹⁴

The interdisciplinary character of the cultural studies approach allows key principles and conceptualisations of Norbert Elias's figurational

theory, and selected tenets of Michel Foucault's work on discourses, to be interweaved.¹⁵ The focus, however, will not upon the macro-politics of power — state, class, the economy as in many cultural studies projects¹⁶ — rather it will be upon the micro-politics of power existing in social life, pluralities of meaning in social events, interdependencies, and the media's often highly fractured discursive relations, which serve the purposes of varied social groupings.

Meaning in the media is seen as arising out of features defining and constructing social experience: unintended consequences of collective actions, the interplay of irrationality and rationality (and whatever lies in between), interdependent relationships, conflict, and processual development. Such features drive at the analytical touchstone of figurational methodology: that innumerable interdependencies drive social life.¹⁷ As Sut Jhally commented: 'The meaning of mediated sport is the outcome of a complex articulation of technical, organisational, economic, cultural, political and social factors'.¹⁸

Meaning is drawn from negotiation between all these spheres and their overlapping and competing discourses.¹⁹ By examining these and their historical trajectories, an opportunity is provided to come to grips with the structuring, and most importantly, the circulation of social meaning. In an increasingly media-driven social world, it is worthwhile attempting to make sense of media production processes, and texts, in order to understand how the media helps us understand sport as a social activity and as a mediated product.

The Media-Sport Production Complex and Its Significance

The approach undertaken in examining Origin football gives insight into selected aspects of what Eliasian theorist, Joe Maguire, terms the 'media-sport production complex'.²⁰ It is comprised of three main groups: sports organisations, media and marketing organisations, and media personnel; and is concerned with cultural flows and interdependencies at both the local and global levels, and more particularly, those generated within 'mediascapes'. By situating the nexus between media/sport/capital at the heart of the complex, it helps negotiate the complicated interrelationships constituting sports forms, products and images, and how these are projected and sold to large audiences.

While the role of television is far from ignored, the main media source used in addressing Origin violence is the popular press. David

Rowe has suggested that compared to the sports electronic media, the sports print media has been widely neglected in academic analyses, despite its role in generating loyal and sizeable audiences, and its position as a site of significant popular identification.²¹ Furthermore, the intimacy and weight of detail contained within the literary form legitimates many of the 'objective' facts contained within the sports news story for the reader, placing these news outlets in a position of interpretative authority.

The first two daily newspapers analysed were the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Herald) and the *Courier-Mail* because their respective readership was in the Origin states of New South Wales and Queensland. The other newspaper, *the Australian*, had a more national circulation. The broadsheet *Herald* is Sydney based, and serves a daily New South Wales wide readership of approximately 268 000. The *Mail* is a Brisbane broadsheet newspaper with a Queensland- wide readership of approximately 220 000 daily. The broadsheet *Australian* has a national Monday to Friday readership of approximately 122 000 each day, with approximately 310 000 Saturday readers.²²

Output of print journalists is the primary concern in examining Origin rugby league. These personnel play a pivotal role in the production process which dictates the form and content of 'sport mediated products'.²³ Their role in social and sporting life is paramount as journalists, in many respects, seek to reinforce what is 'common sense' in our understanding of social relationships.²⁴ As Jim McKay and David Rowe explain, common sense appeal equates to a great deal of power being invested in journalism as a social agent as the media are allowed to 'set *the agenda* with respect to what is considered proper, normal, logical and obvious in sport'.²⁵ Their appears little critical appreciation that sports journalism is produced within an institutionalised setting which has its own largely unchallenged collective conventions, practices, orthodoxies and identities. It is vital to examine journalistic practice to grasp the spectacularised, dramatised, and mythologised²⁶ characteristics of Origin rugby league.

The methodological utility of using the popular press is further enhanced when considering sports journalism — the 'secondary text' — and its relationship with the 'primary text',²⁷ in this instance, rugby league. Michael Oriard states persuasively of the analytical value of the 'secondary text':

I am . . . proposing that the richly detailed record of sports journalism in newspapers and periodicals offers cultural

critics perhaps a unique source: a range of texts that at least bring us close to a varied and changing reading of actual audiences. The texts of popular journalism fall somewhere between totalizing allegory and the specific interpretations of millions of readers. The sportswriter mediates between athletic contest and its audience; sportswriting is the text of that mediation.²⁸

An even more critical point, suggested by Oriard, was that the investigation of these records afforded genuine insight into relationships of power and meaning within the game, especially given the positioning of journalism between the actual sport and the reader:

The case of football demonstrates clearly that meaning, and thus the power of making meaning, resides neither in the text alone nor alone in its readers, but in the negotiations between the two.²⁹

Journalists act as ‘intermediary interpreters’³⁰ of sporting events: they construct ethnographic narratives³¹ taking into account audience identities, differences and power interrelationships.³²

Audiences directly influence how ‘facts’ take shape — how they are observed, recorded, chosen, interpreted and presented, and what language³³ and narrative structures are then implemented. By investigating and dissecting competing discourses,³⁴ we come closer to understanding the structures of power and meaning within Origin rugby league, and how these interact with the countless interpretations of readers of newspapers and periodicals.³⁵ Football, and sport generally, is a ‘multiply interpreted cultural text’, it brings us closer to its meaning among its many observers as Oriard has suggested.³⁶

Sanctioned Violence: 1980 to 1984

The discursive practice of mythologising is central to the establishment of Origin rugby league. For many, doubts over the merit of the Origin concept were dispelled in 1980 when Qld captain, Arthur Beetson, punched a NSW player in the first Origin fixture. The *Australian*, *Courier-Mail* and *Herald* all regarded this act of violence, and others following, as proof of the intense interstate rivalry. Beetson’s ‘Arthurian’ legacy was interpreted at the time by Lawrie Kavanagh:

He shook off any suggestions of injury or disinterest when he crashed, slashed and punched his way through his Australian team mates in the New South Wales team.³⁷

Bret Harris in his popular account of the series' development wrote that 'Beetson's *immortal* blow remained the most critical point in the history of the series'.³⁸ Violence is interpreted as a central feature of the mystique and mythology that has built Origin football. Astoundingly, one rugby league publication has even compared the first Origin match to the shooting of John F Kennedy, and man walking on the moon in terms of historical precedence.³⁹

The framing of violence from 1980 to 1984 by the popular press largely approved and/or legitimised player actions. Kevin Young and Michael Smith identify three features of media texts serving this approving function: the melodramatic headline, commending the violent player, and photographs.⁴⁰ Violence was framed spectacularly in headlines: 'Maroons do it again in brutal clash',⁴¹ 'Marauding Maroons turn on a night of murder',⁴² and 'Maroons mangle NSW'.⁴³ Players indulging in violent acts such as brawls, punching, head-high tackles and kicking — all regular features of games at this time — were commended through descriptions of them as 'courageous' and 'tough' protagonists merely engaging in 'over-vigorous play', 'tough stuff', 'fierce encounters', and 'flareups'.

The issue of photography is very important as Origin reports are intermittently accompanied by photographs of players brawling and even bleeding. John Nauright has suggested that photographs 'present and reconfirm dominant notions about the way "things are" in society'.⁴⁴ Such images of Origin rugby league give an impression of illegitimate violence as a regular and unavoidable part of the game, and even necessary or desirable. This is especially so when photographs of brawls are accompanied by captions such as, 'The traditional softening up brawl took only seconds to erupt . . .',⁴⁵ and 'NSW and Queensland do their best to sort out a difference of opinion . . .',⁴⁶ or, are depicted and then not even commented upon in the accompanying article. Many of the dominant narratives framing Origin violence were firmly established in its first five years. Media discourses are laden with often approving, or at best impartial, references to illegitimate violence. Even the infamous elbow of NSW forward Les Boyd, which smashed Qld forward Daryl Brohman's jaw (for which Boyd later received a twelve-month suspension), received only minor attention in match reports.⁴⁷ The culture of Origin is one accepted by the media as 'naturally' violent.

State of War

Within the media-sport production complex a common practice of journalists is to produce discourses framing sporting contests, particularly those involving heavy body contact, as militaristic confrontation — an ‘us versus them’ war. As a dramatising discursive practice this is in evidence throughout the entire history of Origin football. Intertextual allusion to sport and war was an easy way to portray intense parochial rivalry between NSW and Qld teams as it provided the ‘mass media with an easily mobilised and highly articulated semiotic system and set of cultural values to advance and justify’.⁴⁸ This system and set of values is a framework⁴⁹ allowing violence within Origin to be viewed, understood, sanctioned and framed impartially, and even positively.

The sport and war metaphor interdependently serves both the mass media’s cultural and corporate agendas. The cultural agenda, to attract large audiences through presentation styles which have wide and easily understood appeal, serves the corporate agenda of being financially profitable. The most notorious example of the electronic media framing Origin as war came in 1983 when the Channel Nine television network promoted Origin as ‘World War III’, and featured footage of the aforementioned Les Boyd and Daryl Brohman incident.⁵⁰ This was followed up by a ‘State against State and Mate against Mate’ marketing and television campaign. The print media reinforced this use of militaristic discourse in multiple headlines: ‘First blood to the Blues’,⁵¹ ‘For the Blues, World War III ends in surrender’,⁵² ‘Maroons draw first blood in interstate war’,⁵³ and ‘Blues win war of attrition’.⁵⁴ These headlines, and others like them, were supported by articles containing language which drew on related military dialect: ‘Battle’, ‘attack’, ‘defence’, ‘bomb’, ‘targeted’, ‘destroyed’, ‘tactics’, ‘trigger’, ‘cannoned’, ‘decisive manoeuvre’ and ‘leadership’.⁵⁵ These discursive formations served to present violence to the sporting public as an inevitable consequence of confrontation between hostile ‘warriors’.

Interstate Rivalry: 1985 to 1988

Rowe affirmed that sport and the media may be used ‘as a mechanism for asserting identity, difference and power’.⁵⁶ Origin coverage between 1985 to 1988 is a poignant case. Brisbane’s *Courier-Mail* often produced decidedly different reports to Sydney’s *Herald* on the same games, with the nationally-circulated *Australian* often differing again. Such diverse

discourse on identical topics demonstrates the fragmentation of narratives within the sporting press, and the extent to which journalists are enmeshed in the identifications and conflicts of their own constituency.⁵⁷ These variables dictated that it is not possible for the media to provide an *incontrovertible* account of social events. Reports act as representations which help structure and decipher a perceived truth and fact, which are not truth and fact.⁵⁸ The 'reality' painted by any one report is not any more correct or 'objective' than another, rather various representations of truth and fact in the media reflect, and are influenced by, particular regional and community values, loyalties, beliefs and parochialisms.

The fragmentation of Origin reports is evident on numerous occasions, particularly when comparing the *Herald*, and the *Courier-Mail*. Differences were evident in many areas such as the fairness of the referee, the extraordinary antipathy generated between the teams by perceived deserved or undeserved selections in the Australian team, and legal or illegal player actions. A prime example was apparent in the aftermath of the second game in the 1988 series, played in Brisbane.⁵⁹ The reporters for the *Australian*, *Courier-Mail* and *Herald* newspapers all reported the sin-binning of Qld captain, Wally Lewis, after a brawl and the crowd reaction, the throwing of half-full and even full beer cans onto the field. The *Herald* and *Australian* then stated that police went to the sidelines to protect the referee and the players. After order was restored, Qld went on to win the game and the series.

The *Courier-Mail* match report focused on the 1988 series win, crowd violence being a secondary concern. Paul Malone's story in the *Courier-Mail*, began:

The catch-cry 'Queenslander' was the soundtrack in another Queensland rugby league State of Origin series triumph with a fiery and dramatic 16-6 defeat of NSW at Lang Park last night.

Wally Lewis and his men dug deep into their reserves of pride to come back from behind to emerge series winners for the fifth time in a rugged and at times spiteful encounter.⁶⁰

It is not until the seventh paragraph that the beer can throwing incident was mentioned. With no details provided of the context of this event, the reporter conveyed the impression that the incident was a minor one. By contrast, the *Herald* gave prominence to the event and expressed outrage that the safety of the referee and players had been placed at risk. The

match report began with the headlines, 'Ban Lang Park booze, says Arthurson' and 'Mayhem on and off the field mars Origin', followed by a sensationalised report:

The inevitable happened at Lang Park last night — there was simultaneously mayhem on and off the field.

The rabid Queensland parochialism — no, nationalism — and the hyped-up nature of the State of Origin clash ensured the night would come when the party would turn ugly.

Those television viewers who saw the second-half brawl . . . and a subsequent shower of full beer cans, saw only the end of Brisbane's version of a fun night.⁶¹

It is not until the report's final three paragraphs that the victory of Qld in the series was mentioned. Between these two extremes lay the *Australian* report. Its headline was, 'Qld lands KO on night of spite', but the report concentrated on the upcoming selection of the Australian side in which Qld players were expected to dominate. Half-way through the story, the beer can throwing — 'a disgraceful incident'⁶² — was described. Both the series win *and* the crowd violence were part of the *Australian's* 'news' of the night, but the overt Qld parochialism of the *Courier-Mail*, and the anti-Brisbane sentiment of the *Herald*, were absent. Such pluralist interpretations highlight the fact that journalists act as 'intermediary interpreters' of social events and that their respective audiences have a major bearing on their interpretations.

During this period, Qld parochialism became an, almost *the*, acutely dominant narrative within the *Courier-Mail*. McKay and Middlemiss argue that the performance of Qld Origin sides was viewed as an avenue to overcome insinuations of Queensland cultural inferiority, and was testimony to the state's 'rugged' character.⁶³ 'Ruggedness' was reflected in the perceived ability of Queenslanders to emerge victorious and to dedicate themselves themselves, even to the point of risking serious injury, for their state's cause. A front page *Courier-Mail* story in 1985, for instance, emphasised that, although losing, Qld players suffered numerous injuries of varying severity on the 'battlefield'.⁶⁴ A more potent example of *Courier-Mail* parochialism came in 1988 when a page one editorial declared:

Congratulations to . . . all the boys of that *tough* Queensland rugby league side . . . this could not have been achieved without

footballers who seem not to know the meaning of the words 'pain' and 'fatigue' and who, when they pull on that maroon jersey, can play like men inspired.⁶⁵ (emphasis added)

The indirect consequences of such jingoism are not always confined to on-field violence. Burgeoning interstate rivalry coincided with regular crowd disturbances at Brisbane's Lang Park, with 70 arrests in one year.⁶⁶ Player safety, as already noted, was being endangered in another instance.⁶⁷

Media discourse helped construct dichotomous symbols such as 'friends' and 'enemies', thus propagating rivalries.⁶⁸ The press generated discourses framing Qld and NSW as bitter rugby league enemies — the 'Canetoads' versus the 'Cockroaches' — though these mascots also had an ironic and even humorous dimension, perhaps suggesting the enemy which each side and state loved to hate. Violent descriptions such as 'hate', 'mayhem', 'spite', and 'aggression' infused the lexicon of journalists bringing this rivalry to life. Periodically, support was provided by on-field brawls, but during 1985 to 1988 it was inferred that illegitimate violent acts were falling in intensity and frequency as reports began to speak of 'controlled aggression', and 'heavy [but legal] tackling' being reasons for victory. The important feature of this period was that the majority of illegitimate on-field violence was mentioned and intimately dwelt on by the press. Unlike 1980 to 1984, violence had shifted from being simply accepted as a regular and natural feature of Origin, to prominent and spectacular 'evidence' of interstate antagonism.

It is apparent that the cementing of Qld and NSW rivalry assisted in increasing Origin's value as a product for consumption by the sporting public. Between 1985 and 1988, Sydney attendances rose to levels comparable to Brisbane which had consistently close-to-capacity crowds at Lang Park since 1980 (see Table 1). Television ratings were also growing (see Table 2). That the surge in popularity of Origin coincided with increased press parochialism demonstrates that media reports relate closely to, and are interdependent with, those local and regional identities and loyalties which form their markets. Ultimately, the commercial profitability of both media institutions and sporting organisations are reliant on answering to and the servicing of these markets.

Table 1: Average Attendances at State of Origin Fixtures in Brisbane and Sydney.⁶⁹

YEARS	SYDNEY (SCG and SFS) ⁷⁰	BRISBANE (Lang Park)
1980-84	23 650	26 636
1985-88	33 035	29 166
1989-95	40 988	34 028

**Average of three games held in Melbourne at Olympic Park (1990) and Melbourne Cricket Ground (1994-95): 54 769*

Table 2: Average Television Ratings for State of Origin in Sydney⁷¹

YEARS	AVERAGE RATINGS
1982-83	21.8
1984-86	29.3
1987-89	30.3
1990-92	37.3
1993-94	45.2

**1992: Only one match rating available. 1980-81, 1995 ratings unavailable.*

Violence, the Media and Masculinity

*'Football in the 1990s is about violence; it is about masculine identity . . .'*⁷²

Though Oriard was discussing American football, this comment is equally relevant to rugby league, and in particular, Origin media coverage. Gendered values lie at the core of the media system.⁷³ Therefore it is crucial to recognise the homosocial character of the Australian sports media, and its function in deciding 'what the people get'.⁷⁴ In Origin's case, the assumed make-up of the 'people' and what they receive, by and large, excludes female involvement, experience, and opinion.⁷⁵ Privilege, glamour and respect are awarded to the male-only preserve of Origin rugby league with its rationalised and normative aggression, violence, domination, toughness and injury.

Resistance to the hyper-masculinity acted out on the football arena is effectively framed out by the sacred status that Origin held within Australian sport and the media. To resist is to violate a firmly entrenched gender order.⁷⁶ The disheartening experience of an Australian female academic, Helen Yeates, when she sought to challenge the 'shrill and insistent form of brash, heterosexual sporting masculinity in football reporting',⁷⁷ and the ex-nomination⁷⁸ of female experience within football and sporting discourse, was a telling case study. It also indicated how deeply this form of ex-nomination was embedded within the discursive practices of the sporting media.

Yeates wrote an article in *Social Alternatives*, entitled 'Women, the Media and Football Violence', which focused on an allegedly violent, off-the-field incident involving Qld State of Origin players.⁷⁹ The article perceptively condemned the rugby league media for celebrating, trivialising or ignoring violence, using traditional phallogocentric terms in reporting, and articulating images and representations of masculine superiority and strength, contributing to the 'annihilation' of female experience in the media. It provoked a strong negative reaction from a number of print, radio and television outlets, which regarded Yeates's article not only as an attack on rugby league, but Australian men in general. Yeates commented on the experience:

My views were diluted, distorted, trivialised, overlooked and satirised. According to the media, I represented a threat to Australian manhood. I dealt with a volatile subject, the sacred cow of Rugby League, not fully understanding the passion and interest within certain sections of the community.⁸⁰

Sections of the media were outraged that someone, especially a woman, dared question their biological determinist and reductive view of violence and masculinity. As *the Courier-Mail* announced, Yeates is 'a woman who won't play the game'⁸¹ Even those who agreed with the need to condemn aspects of rugby league violence often 'appropriated it on their own terms', paying scant attention to anything Yeates had said from her critical feminist perspective,⁸² reverting instead to nebulous, simplistic explanation.

Media response to Yeates's article demonstrates the gendered character of the media-sport production complex. It is not possible to isolate gender within the social and cultural interdependencies and

processes flowing between sport and media institutions, or any other social institutions.⁸³ Currently, the sporting, and rugby league, gender order is one heavily dominated by masculine values and ideals, and these are protected vigilantly, both implicitly and explicitly, by media personnel. Yeates's experience demonstrated there is a good case to be made that male dominance and monopolisation of sporting and media power relations privileges the 'aggression/force/violence' tripartite in sport. In turn, this served to legitimise, and naturalise, the inferiorisation and marginalisation of women and their activities.⁸⁴

Media Realities and Commercial Explosion: 1989 to 1995

The period 1989 to 1995 was one in which State of Origin secured its position as a genuinely national sporting event with dramatic audience growth (see Table 3). The press regularly stressed violence within Origin fixtures using often alarmist and extremist narratives in match reporting. A selection of reporting included the following comments:

'State of Conflict,' boomed the pre-match voice-over, 'State of Mayhem, State of War'. Yep (sic). State of Origin I, 1992, 34th game, in an increasingly remarkable series, turned out to be all those things.⁸⁵

Blues prop Paul Harragon belted back Bella, the human rhino ... Bella belted Harragon ... Blues hooker Benny Elias thumped Maroons No. 9 Steve Walters, and Walters thumped Elias ... No one was badly hurt, it should be noted.⁸⁶

Smith suffered bleeding to the brain and a fractured cheekbone as souvenirs of his shortened Origin debut, in an off-the-ball tackle by Roberts in which their heads collided ...⁸⁷

They fought, they bled and they won ... Queensland scored one of the most memorable victories against NSW in State of origin ...⁸⁸

These comments contrast markedly with the official stance of Australian Rugby League (ARL) officials, and ex-players, in the 1990s on the issue of violence. Referees' director, Mick Stone, stated that:

The young footballers of the '90s have accepted that foul play is intolerable ... The new rules regarding violent play have made a difference in club football and benefited the players, who appreciate the freedom ... The players are more

comfortable and confident of standing in tackles and not being belted, and because of this, State of Origin football will be even more exciting than ever before in the years to come.⁸⁹

such a comment underlines the greater physical and emotional control of players and their disdain over violence in the 1990s as compared with the 1980s. Former Origin participants also recognise that the levels of violence levels have declined. Four high profile ex-players even argued that Origin has become boring and formulaic due to the lack of violence, or 'biffo', with brawling reaching nowhere near the scale of many 1980s matches.⁹⁰ One commented that 'I didn't see a hand lifted in anger. That's what Origin is about.'⁹¹ It seems clear that while violence undoubtedly occurs in Origin, it is not on the scale of previous years. ARL Chairman Ken Arthurson made clear in 1991 that illegitimate violence would be met by serious official retaliatory action:

I will be . . . reiterating the ARL code of conduct in the strongest possible terms . . . Anyone who is foolish enough to try it on again is looking for trouble and can be assured they will face a long time out of the game. They will suffer the consequences of breaching the code of conduct — either suspension, disqualifications or fine . . . I am determined to cut out this behaviour.⁹²

Indicators are that Origin football has been influenced by encroaching player behaviour self-control mechanisms. Ensuing conduct regularisation appeared to have produced lower levels of illegitimate violence than in the 1980s. If this was the case, why then did press coverage between 1989 to 1995 give the impression violence had increased, or at least remained stable, since the early 1980s? Many Origin press stories of the 1990s amplified and glamorised violence, with it being central to dominant media discourses. The belief of Eric Dunning and Ken Sheard that the media tends to over-react, exaggerate, distort, and sensationalise sporting violence bears consideration.⁹³ This is also consistent with the argument that the media-sport production complex generates news stories which are representations of reality.⁹⁴ The 1990s Origin newspaper 'reality' (or 'unreality' as it may be) contains many features of a media-driven violence feed-back cycle.⁹⁵ There was an over-emphasis on, and distortion of, violence despite the actions and comments of those intimately involved in controlling and playing the game, who suggested diminished levels of violence.

Significantly, media representations of violence have not adversely effected the commercial popularity of Origin football. The period 1989 to 1995 has seen Origin consolidate its position as a major national sporting event, creating large national and international (mainly New Zealand and Papua New Guinea) television audiences. The Origin concept has been successfully exported to Melbourne with an impressive average attendance of 54 769 (see Table 1), including a record 85 513 spectators at the home of Australian Rules football, the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Origin's television market penetration into traditionally Australian Rules cities such as Adelaide, Melbourne and Perth (see Table 3), which up to this point had limited interest in rugby league, has provided the basis for a national and international rugby league competition.⁹⁶

Table 3: Average Peak Television Ratings in Major Australian Capital Cities for State of Origin Series 1991-1994.⁹⁷

CITY	1991	1992	1993	1994
Brisbane	62	56	56	58
Sydney	52	50	50	54
Perth	13	22	25	24
Adelaide	18	21	18	27
Melbourne	9	20	19	27

It is apparent that the media discourse, which exaggerates violence, had done little to tarnish Origin's reputation, or damage its popularity for a number of interrelated reasons. Firstly, as already stated, the print media has regularly distorted and misrepresented levels of violence in its reporting. Secondly, Origin's growing popularity managed to 'create, develop and influence a whole new customer base'.⁹⁸ This once a year, Origin series only audience, focused on much of the associated 'razzamatazz' and dramatisation in the television coverage, and in any case, viewed legitimate and sporadic illegitimate violence as part of the overall package. Thirdly, and underpinning the previous points, volatility within Origin football was viewed as a crucial part of its promotion as a media and television 'special',⁹⁹ quite apart from club games. As a 'special', separate and specific organisational and presentational pre-conditions were applied to Origin. Intermittent illegitimate violence, which was considered anomalous and intolerable in a club match context, was often

accepted and viewed as ‘proof’ of the fierce rivalry held between Qld and NSW. It was the intensity and violent embodiment of this rivalry on the field which framed the games’ highly successful presentation. Rightly or wrongly, those controlling and staging Origin appeared to believe that a less antagonistic presentational form would somehow diffuse and debase this framing and consequently diminish the immense audience of Origin. Certainly, the Australian media saw little commercial sense in enforcing stricter violence regulation and has done nothing substantial to encourage such a move.

Conclusions: Interdependencies and the Media

There have been quite discernible developments and tensions in the ways the mass media has treated Origin violence. From the early 1980s, illegitimate violence was simply ‘part of the game’ — a part central to the development and selling of the Origin concept to audiences — which was also the case in the 1990s when illegitimate violence became subject to greater regulation and control. Tension existed because during the 1990s the commercial media continued to utilise alarmist images and descriptions of violence to frame Origin as a ‘sports mediated product’, despite the decrease in violence levels. This leads to the heart of an understanding of media representations of sport—they are only mediated accounts of ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ and such accounts are (often heavily) influenced by assorted media production practices. These practices, in turn, are shaped by interrelated corporate and cultural agendas.

Finally, the ‘secondary texts’ of the media open all the complexities and diversity of the media-sport production complex. These perform many functions, and react to and generate innumerable social and cultural meanings. Analysis of the narratives and discourses driving media reports opens the manifold interdependencies shaping the way we view commercial sport, and in this case, Origin violence. As an avenue for research it offers many possibilities, particularly as an historical approach can help wrestle with the multitudes of media ‘realities’ and/or the discourses thrown up. Such an approach is imperative to properly account for the circulation of social meaning, and the negotiation and renegotiation of this meaning, in contemporary sporting social relations.

NOTES:

- 1 I wish to thank Janine Mikosza, Murray Phillips and two anonymous referees of this journal, for their helpful comments on drafts of this article.

- 2 *Rugby League Week*, 3 June 1987.
- 3 This position is vindicated by the television ratings in 1991 and 1994 showing it to be the most popular television program of the year of any category. For 1991 figures see 8 Harris, *Winfield State of Origin 1980-1991*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1992, p. 3; for 1994 figures see *Australian*, 29 Nov. 1994.
- 4 *Rugby League Week State of Origin Special*, 1993, p. 21.
- 5 *Margaret Gee's Australian Media Guide: November 1995 — March 1996*, Information Australia, Margaret Gee Media, Melbourne, 1995.
- 6 Viewer numbers based on the 1995 rating figures which were actually poorer than the 1993 figures. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 Nov. 1995.
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