I wish I had read this book 20 years ago. As an idealistic sportswriter with the daily Vancouver Province, it would have helped me to better understand both sports reporting's place within the newspaper industry and the awkward relationship between the institutions of journalism and professional sport. Situating his ethnographic study of sportswriters at an unidentified Canadian daily newspaper within a body of work that posits news production as "the act of constructing reality rather than recording it" (p. 5), Lowes characterizes this relationship as a symbiosis between a commercial news industry needing to package a male demographic for advertisers and a commercial sports industry demanding daily publicity. He writes: "The point I want to stress here is that the existence of sport does not depend on media coverage. But the continued existence and success of intense major-league sporting spectacle does" (p. 12).

Reading this book today, however, being much more familiar with the political economy of communication and social constructionist approaches to news work, I find that it falls short of giving the topic the depth and complexity it deserves. Lowes makes an important point about the particularities of sportswriting within the news industry, but he oversimplifies its symbiotic relationship to major-league sports. There is something too neat and tidy about the structural relationship he describes.

Lowes wants the reader to understand "why it is that some sports and athletes enjoy regular and voluminous press coverage and others virtually none" (p. 6). And he goes a long way toward explaining the "commercial sports bias" of the daily press. In Chapter 1, for instance, Lowes explains why professional sports needs the media and why the media need professional sports. On the one hand, media coverage is ubiquitous publicity for teams, helping to produce sports fans. On the other, professional sports coverage helps newspapers to deliver "quality audiences" to advertisers, in this case males between the ages of 18 and 49. In Chapter 3 he explains how the sports-beat system provides "predictably available information" to meet newspapers' time and space demands: "In short, the whole point of the reporter's beat work is to generate major-league sports news to fill the sports section. The sense of how little or how much is actually happening is largely irrelevant to the normative requirement—without exception—for reporters to produce these stories" (p. 43). And in Chapter 4, Lowes documents the lengths to which commercial sports organizations go to facilitate news work: providing a regular stream of press releases; holding frequent press conferences; publishing extensive media guides; meeting reporters' requests for access to athletes, training sessions, and games; and providing sophisticated communications facilities at sports arenas.

But there are numerous instances where more elaboration is required. Chapter 1, for example, never really explains why the male audience is so privileged by advertisers. It is simply taken for granted. Chapter 6 raises the issue of ideology, but does not acknowledge the extent to which sportswriters are themselves sports fans and thus willingly serve the promotional interests of the major-league teams they cover.

Chapter 5 is the most troublesome chapter, however. Here, Lowes addresses the fine line reporters must walk between maintaining positive relations with sources and upholding journalistic standards, but he leads the reader to believe that negotiating this line is easier than it is. While he deals at some length with the transgressions that lead to physical confrontations between reporters and athletes, reporters being barred from locker rooms and athletes refusing to speak to the press, he fails to recognize that these incidents—which he dismisses as exceptional cases (p. 84)—say a great deal about the power differential inherent in the symbiosis between the commercial news industry and the commer-
cial sports industry. In the era of all-sports television channels, jock-talk radio shows, and specialty-sports magazines, a daily newspaper is far more dependent upon its local major-league franchise than that franchise is dependent on any one newspaper or any one reporter.

Lowes’ argument works well on the macrostructural scale, in which he considers the political-economic interdependency of two social institutions: commercial sport and commercial media. It is this interdependence, after all, which has made professional sports franchises attractive properties for media conglomerates.

But the book is less convincing at ground level, where ethnography takes place. It is here that structural relationships become daily, face-to-face interactions, and it is here that the media-sport symbiosis appears to be decidedly out of kilter. The athletes, coaches, and managers who, in principle at least, need the media to survive, regularly intimidate, abuse, and simply ignore reporters with impunity. Even the most conscientious of sportswriters learns to accept that it is the professional sports teams which decide and enforce the rules of engagement: when and where they can conduct interviews; what kinds of questions are permissible; what kinds of subjects can be broached; who can be accredited; what kinds of information reporters have access to.

These rules have a significant impact on the kind of sports journalism reporters can practise, and are integral to the sport-media symbiosis Lowes seeks to describe. They reveal that while the interests of sports teams and newspapers coincide at the economic level, the interests of commercial sport and journalism can also diverge in important ways. At the same time, Lowes ignores the complex dimension of peer pressure. While most journalists seek the respect of those they cover, they care much more about what other journalists think of their work. Newspaper sports reporters, more so than their broadcast cousins, have to negotiate a tension between the pressure to prove themselves “team players” by others on the sports beat and the pressure to prove themselves “real reporters” in their own newsrooms. Any reporter or columnist who adopts an adversarial or critical stance—which may win the respect of colleagues in his or her own newsroom, and which may best serve the newspaper’s readers—will encounter considerable flak from other reporters on the beat. This is not because of jealousy, but because most sports reporters see themselves as “supporting” the team in their own way, and because these few critical journalists expose the lack of substantial criticism within sports journalism. Again, what might this say about the manufacture of sports news?

*Inside the Sports Pages* does a nice job of bringing sports reporting within social constructionist studies of journalism, but it could have gone a lot further in developing the particularities of the genre. As an ethnographic study, it needed to give much more credence to the interpersonal dimension of the interrelationship between sports reporting and commercial sporting spectacle.

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