

Arthur A. Raney and Jennings Bryant (eds.), **Handbook of Sports and Media**, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2006, 633 pp, \$69.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Dan Durbin
University of Southern California

Over the last decade, the intersection of sports and media in American culture has grown considerably in interest to scholars across a variety of disciplines. Current attempts within the National Communication Association to establish an interest group on the subject and an upcoming special sports media edition of the *Western Journal of Communication* illustrate this growing interest in the field of communication. These attempts at broadening the study of sports and media also indicate the relatively low volume of published research on the subject. Since the 1989 publication of *Media, Sports and Society*, little has been done to collect current research in the field and offer scholars a comprehensive examination of the subject.

Arthur A. Raney and Jennings Bryant attempt to fill this research gap with their encyclopedic collection of essays, *Handbook of Sports and Media*. At 633 pages, this *Handbook*, offers a comprehensive overview of current research in the field, a variety of articles on the evolution of sports media, and a discussion of important subjects that have interested scholars. Raney and Bryant take a thematic approach, offering articles from a variety of authors on the "history, industry, audience, and critical issues" of sports media (p. xii).

In most respects, the strength of this volume is in its discussion of the sports industry and audience from a cross disciplinary perspective. Importantly, the volume covers the proliferation of new media over the last decade. This leads to discussions of online sports coverage, sports on television and radio, fantasy sports, virtual gaming, the impact of cable television (though, newer media have already dated some of this discussion), and the continuing evolution of how games are sold to and packaged through various media. The discussion of the industry and its audiences covers well over half the book and offers important insights into how contemporary media creates both audiences and meaning for the sports it promotes.

I am particularly impressed by the importance the various writers place on specialization and segmentation in contemporary sports media. As author after author points out, the sheer volume and variety of media available for sports communication has changed the way in which sports exist in culture. The "gigantism" of these media has essentially forced sports marketers to tightly segment target markets and offer far more specialized sports programming (p. 42).

This specialization and segmentation of media creates media outlets for a variety of newer sports and pseudo-sports like X-Games and Texas Hold'em Poker. In turn, these outlets allow marketers to segment and target much more specific audiences for their products (p. 256). The change from a culture in which professional baseball and football were the dominant sports played out largely over three television networks which gave them legitimacy into a culture in which, because of the proliferation of

media, sport subcultures have been built around a variety of newer sports is of particular interest. This change allows many of the authors in this collection to closely examine various sports audiences and their values. That they find so many audiences with their own languages, interests, and values speaks of the diversity and complexity of this subject.

These insights into contemporary sports media and its audiences are interesting and help balance the relatively light study of the history of sports media and culture in the book. In fact, those looking for a history of the evolution and growth of sports media might be let down as that theme receives barely 45 pages of coverage and half of that is taken up with a discussion of sport in ancient Greece.

The lone article that deals with the development of modern sports media offers a solid introduction to the subject. Jennings Bryant and Andrea M. Holt trace the sports-media relationship over the last 200 years, accurately noting that "the idiosyncratic nature of U.S. culture has greatly facilitated this close-knit, even symbiotic, association" (p. 21). However, the brevity of this discussion leaves some significant gaps in the book's coverage of "critical issues." I will have more to say on this in a moment.

Concerns in theory and research are offered excellent coverage throughout the book. Lawrence A. Wenner offers a particularly perceptive examination of concerns in sports media research. Significantly, he notes the intersection between sports and politics in U.S. culture, a topic he allows is understudied even in Raney and Bryant's giant collection.

To the degree that their citizenship is formed by and influenced by mediated sport, we should be paying particular attention. It is notable the topic of mediated sports and politics is absent from the mix in this volume. For this, I don't hold the editors responsible. Rather, we may have gotten out of the practice of looking through this lens. This is notable in that sports metaphor is often used in politics that we see politicians make media opportunities to bask in the reflected glory of sports success, and the sport system's logic has long been bolstered by the notion that sports builds character. There are many important opportunities ahead for researchers to visit the intersection where media and sports meet politics and citizenship (p. 58).

As Wenner notes, that these opportunities are largely lost in this volume says more about the state of research in the field than about the editors' focus. Since so much of the discussion of public discourse among communication scholars, in particular, focuses on political discourse, it would seem natural that we would extend this focus to the intersection of political discourse and sports discourse. Certainly, this would seem a fertile field for research. But, again Wenner notes fairly that our focus has been taken up with other concerns and we may have missed some important research opportunities.

Thus, as the "critical issues" section of this book demonstrates, scholars persistently write about the relationship between violence and sports. This question should open to us a variety of subjects in political discourse and the use of sports language and values to justify public policies involving violent actions (such as the current "war" in Iraq where war is often discussed as a "winnable" contest). Yet, as Bruce Gunter notes in his essay on sports violence, our research remains locked on the somewhat

narrower question of how viewing sports may lead to violent behavior. Gunter also notes that this research has been dogged by a variety of assumptions that may not lead to accurate results (p. 361). Hence, we end up with research with a too narrow focus that may be flawed in its conclusions.

On a related concern of narrow focus, I would note that the critical issues section of the book focuses the discussion on race and most of its other critical issues almost solely on contemporary issues of media and personalities. In a handbook of sports and media, I would have appreciated a comprehensive discussion of the intersection between issues of race and sport over the last 200 years. Race and sport have been tightly linked in U.S. media since the days of the Penny Press and many of the most important (and contentious) battles over issues of race were played out in sports media.

I would think that the heavyweight championship of Jack Johnson (and the search for a "Great White Hope" through contemporary media, largely driven by then popular author Jack London) would warrant an extended discussion. Certainly, from the breaking of the color barrier in baseball to the celebration of sports as a value system that can create brotherhood across racial barriers in films such as *Brian's Song* and *Remember the Titans*, race, sports, and politics have all intersected in sports media and become much of the drama that we recognize as U.S. culture. The brevity of "history" as a theme in this volume may lead the handbook to miss some historical issues that could inform contemporary discussions of race and sports.

As its title suggests, Raney and Bryant's *Handbook of Sports and Media* does offer readers a useful tool for exploring some of the basic concerns scholars face in studying this uniquely important subject. In particular, it offers some excellent discussion of the growth of contemporary sports media. Though, the most useful lesson the book may teach is that sports and sports media remain such large topics, intersecting so many social and political concerns, that a 633-page handbook can only begin to scratch the surface of this study.