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Nationbuilding in major sports events: a case of the IPL

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Abstract

This study examines how the South African print media framed ideas of the nation in the context of the 2009 Indian Premier League (IPL). Using a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 50 newspaper articles published in the run-up to the IPL, the study draws on research on agenda setting; sport and the media; global sporting events; and the media's role in nationbuilding to examine the relationship of sports and the media, in particular with regards to national identity during major sports events.

The study finds that, while sectors of the South African media attempted to use the IPL to boost the nation's image of itself and its capabilities, newspapers with largely black readerships did not report on the IPL during the timeframe, despite an apparent push by others – the government and the "white" press – to contribute to a nation-building exercise. Also, despite South Africa being awarded numerous international sporting events, the media reacted to criticism with what can be described as defensiveness, suggesting feelings of vulnerability and anxiety about its role in the global society of nations. All of these point to a media and society still divided, even after 15 years of democracy, and a nation still licking its wounds.

The study further found that, in a changing world of globalising sports events, national media are still inclined to interpret these transnational events in a national way. While the public relations machines of global sports companies do try to set the media's agenda, there are national issues that make their way onto the agenda regardless. These issues are framed according to agendas that the media brings to the topic.