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The Impact of Sports Metaphors on the Media and Public Sphere

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“He can’t get by with a ground rule double tonight...He has got to hit a home run!” It is not unreasonable to assume that a sports newscaster made this statement; however, that is not the case. This is actually a quote from veteran political commentator Mark Shields describing in a speech during election primaries how then-incumbent President Barack Obama needed to, “step up to the plate” (as cited Bryant, 2012).

Despite their obvious differences, sports and politics are two worlds that are not as separated as one would think. More than political figures commenting on what is going on in football or basketball, sports terminology is now so often used in the media to describe politics that the jargons have nearly meshed completely. On one hand, the use of sports metaphors can be seen as a way to keep politics interesting and easier to grasp for those who may not necessarily understand or typically care about the process. I would argue, however, that the media’s constant use of sports metaphors to describe politics has established a framework by which political figures and parties can only be seen as winning or losing, encouraging the general public and the public sphere to view politics as merely a “game.” This paradigm of thought solidifies the perception of political differences and discourages cooperation between parties, creates a “spectator effect” that damages participation in the public sphere, and allows for deceptive framing of political issues.

Metaphors can be a wonderful way to help people understand and relate to complicated concepts or topics they may not have experienced before. These metaphors in turn help us define and shape our realities, oftentimes in beneficial ways. For example, teachers may help explain the concept of electrical current to their students as a river, or better yet, as moving particles. The reality-shaping capability of metaphors can be a double-edged sword, however, such as in the extreme example of Adolf Hitler’s constant comparison of Jews to rats before and during World

War II that “justified” the atrocities committed by the Nazi party. The power of metaphors like these in shaping perceptions has led to the current controversies in politics in many ways.

In political discourse, sports metaphors are used all the time, probably to the extent that audiences have never even noticed them. As Dan Stewart (2013) put it in his article “It’s Time to Stop Treating Politics as a Sport,” “the win/lose narrative is so firmly embedded in our political dialogue that we barely even notice it anymore.” American media in particular heavily uses sport terminology from our most popular sports, namely football and baseball, to describe political events and figures. We might say, for example, that a politician is “at bat” when they are about to give an important speech, or say the president is “gaining yardage,” with some new legislation (Bryant, 2012). Sports historian Harold Ray emphasizes that, “our language is permeated with these [sports] terms. We just assume that everyone understands them” (as cited in Feller, 2007).

Election campaigns in particular are subjected to an impressive array of sports metaphors to describe how the two candidates are doing in the polls. Media personnel may say the candidate in the lead is the “front runner,” or that a significant debate was a “game-changer.” The final weeks of the campaign might be described as the “bottom of the ninth,” where the current leader is trying to “run down the clock.” In fact, the campaign itself is often referred to as a “marathon,” or as a “race.” According to Nick Bryant’s 2012 article, “The Shared Language of Sport and Politics,” during the 2012 presidential election, Republican candidate Mitt Romney was even quoted as saying that, “America should hire a new coach,” to which Obama subsequently replied that America wouldn’t want “a losing season” with Romney.

One of the problems with this overuse of sports metaphors is that the public starts to lose focus of the candidates’ platforms and positions, looking instead to how well they are doing in the polls. Determining who will “win” becomes more important than who would actually be a

better politician. Coincidentally enough, this style of media coverage is referred to as “horse-race journalism,” which is riddled with comments like, “Candidate A is up by 2 percent!” and, “Candidate B is catching up in the polls!” As Bryant points out, even the coverage of political events like conventions and debates is now set up like an arena, complete with a press box and commentators describing “the game.”

Despite the convenience for the media to present politics as a game, simplifying the complex process that is required to achieve beneficial results in the government only worsens the already extreme polarization in Washington (Stewart, 2013). “The more we continue to consider politics [as] a game of sports,” Stewart (2013) says, “the worse the logjam in Washington will get.” How many instances can one think of where one party didn’t want legislation to be passed purely because that would let the other side “win”? This is not a new issue, either; Jeffrey L. Bineham points out in his 1991 journal article “Some Ethical Implications of Team Sports Metaphors in Politics” that sports terms establish a set of allegiances for your “team” or political party to win, resulting in the refusal to compromise on issues (p. 35).

A less obvious result of the use of sports metaphors in politics is the establishment of what I call the “spectator effect” within the public sphere. By this, I mean the framing of politics as a spectator sport has discouraged the public from actively participating in the dialogue of politics, where members of a society discuss issues of importance to them. Through this dialogue in the public sphere, or the “conversation of democracy,” people can reach consensus and compromise (McKee, 2005). The public’s voice on political issues created through the public sphere is the bridge between the media and the general population, without which democracy loses an important set of checks and balances. In an age where almost anyone can participate in the political forum through various blogs, social media posts, and the tried-and-true newspaper

editorial, however, the public sphere is still suffering from a mentality that those outside of politics and the media are merely “observing the game.”

Other than possibly distracting players with loud cheering, sports spectators have little to no control over the events of the game they are watching. In politics, where the outcome of an issue can be far more pertinent to the observer (Stewart, 2013), participation by the public is fundamentally the very detail that makes the government a fair democracy. When the media continually describe politics as a game, however, the subtle implication is that the public can only watch rather than participate (Stewart, 2013). And like a sporting game, the people who end up participating only do so through yelling without necessarily understanding what they’re watching. As a result, even when individuals contribute to the public sphere, they end up using the same sports terminology and further promote dissent between opposing views.

Perhaps the most sinister implication of sports metaphors in political commentary is their ability to deceptively frame issues and powerfully impact public perceptions. In his 2007 book, *The Assault on Reason*, Al Gore describes a number of “convenient untruths” and outright falsifications utilized by the Bush administration to push the war agenda in the Middle East. As Gore (2007) points out, Bush’s language choice that framed the war as “the good guys” verses “the bad guys” evoked an emotional response that played on Americans’ fears and typified the demagogical tactics that the White House used at the time. I would argue that this metaphorical language also dangerously simplified the complicated issue into a game that America had to win.

In fact, according to Feller (2007), an abundance of sports jargon filled almost every issue the Bush Administration discussed. During his last few months as president, Bush described his work as a “sprint to the finish” (Feller, 2007). Compare this terminology to the White House’s handling on environmental issues, which chairman of the White House Council

on Environment Quality Jim Connaughton described as running a “marathon” (Feller, 2007). This justification of essentially non-concern is another unethical example of the use of sports metaphors by politicians to powerfully influence the perception of issues of national concern. As the public, it is our responsibility to pay attention to these metaphors that hype up or downplay issues and voice our disapproval in the marketplace of ideas we call the public sphere (Gore, 2007).

While using sports as a way to define politics can be beneficial in its ability to explain and add excitement to the process, so too does it frame the whole debate as a winning and losing affair. It is important for the public sphere and the media to remember that, at the end of the day, politics are a more than just a game. One side should not just be out to “win” and refuse to work with the “losing” side. We must also never forget our responsibility to participate in the political debate rather than “sit on the sidelines.” Finally, we must be aware of metaphors’ ability to frame and distort our perceptions, and through participation in the public sphere call attention to these issues. If the public debate can shift from assuming each party is on opposing sides of an arena to instead respecting each others’ ideas and looking for ways to collaborate towards a common goal, we can influence the media’s portrayal of the issues and eventually frame politics as – dare I use a sports term? – teamwork.

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