

# Australian mainstream media coverage of Asian football

## Abstract

This paper uses coverage of Asian football<sup>1</sup> in the Australian mainstream media as a case study to examine the extent to which agenda setting through interaction between media sports departments and sports journalists potentially impedes the understanding of the game in a broader social and political context. It does so by situating media sports departments and sports journalists in the broader sports field and examines the extent to which the field has adapted its coverage to the particularities of emerging Australian engagement with football in Asia.

For the purposes of this article, the study employed a mixture of participant observation, literature review and informal workplace interviews with a variety of media practitioners. The two participant observation components were comprised of a ten-day working trip to the 2011 AFC Asian Cup in Qatar in January 2011 and a two-week internship at Fairfax Media publication *Brisbane Times* in March.

For the purposes of the study, the definition of “Asian football” is any football competition which takes place under the auspices of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and includes Australian players currently playing in Asian leagues, as well as the performances of Australian teams playing in AFC competitions. The study found that coverage of Asian football is limited by an overarching journalistic framework which inhibits greater media analysis of Asian football and how Australia fits into and interacts with the Asian game.

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<sup>1</sup> the sport is more commonly known as ‘soccer’ in Australia, but in line with recent attitude shifts is referred to as ‘football’ throughout

## Introduction:

Writing in 1963 about the influence of the press, American academic Bernard Cohen said, “it may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling people what to think about.” (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). Although he did not use the term directly, Cohen’s line became synonymous with the journalistic theory of *agenda setting*, whereby news organisations influence their audience by running certain stories at the expense of others. It is unlikely Cohen gave much thought to sports journalism when espousing his theory, yet agenda setting plays an obvious role in a discipline where access to sources is heavily regulated and tight deadlines ensure few supplementary voices are heard.

The print media is seen as a key component of the so-called “fourth estate,” yet sports journalism has traditionally been viewed as a less important by-product of mass communication. Journalist Raymond Boyle writes that sports reporting is often viewed as “a bastion of easy living, sloppy journalism and ‘soft’ news,” (Boyle, 2006, p.2) while David Rowe argues that newspapers are under increasing pressure to produce “lighter, more ‘user-friendly’ topics” (Rowe, 2005, p. 125). Rowe contends that sports journalism is well placed to “discharge a news role based on immediacy and an entertainment function based on celebrity,” (Rowe, 2005, p. 125) and in doing so highlights the dual role of sports journalism as both news reporting and an increasingly popular medium of entertainment.

Indeed, while sociologist Jürgen Habermas described the press as a “genuinely critical organ of a public engaged in critical political debate,” (Habermas, 1991, p. 60) sports journalists are often viewed as little more than glorified fans. (Rowe, 2005, p. 125). Operating in an environment which differs greatly from other journalistic rounds, sports journalists form close personal relationships with players and key media personnel, partly because an increasing number of sporting organisations have implemented tight controls on who the media can access. Pressure exists for sports journalists to not only eschew objective reporting, but “become a fan of, and apologist for” (Rowe, 2005, p. 132) the teams they report on. Indeed, Rowe argues the “construction of the journalist-as-fan makes critical, reflective commentary difficult,” (Rowe, 2005, p. 133) and suggests the convergence of sport and celebrity culture increases pressure on sports journalists to entertain as well as inform. While anecdotal evidence suggests positive sports stories can help boost TV ratings and increase newspaper circulation, negative reporting often results in a public backlash.

In his largely class-based analysis, “How Can One Be A Sports Fan?” French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu identifies the “relative autonomy” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 430) of sport as useful in framing the context of sports journalism as unique, and therefore less subject to the sorts of professional considerations which govern other journalistic rounds. Bourdieu writes that “the powers of self-administration and rule-making” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 430) set sport apart from the rest of society, and in doing so, he reveals the parallel between the cultural “rules” of journalism and how they differ when reporting on sport. Where the average journalist is generally expected to possess background knowledge, interview multiple sources and report objectively on their findings, sports journalists rely heavily on the sources they are afforded access to, occasionally possess limited knowledge of opponents and place undue emphasis on teams who win, with teams who lose traditionally afforded less press coverage in any average match report.

Self-censorship is rife in sports journalism, given the tight deadlines and heavily scrutinised access to players. With match reports filed soon after the completion of a game and quotes from the victors highly sought after, a culture of mutual co-operation between players and journalists has developed, which as Rowe explains, makes it difficult for journalists to provide objective reportage of sporting events. (Rowe, 2005). Conversely, the ability for media officers and player agents to control the flow of information emanating from teams, and individual players, means the relationship between sports reporters and the subjects they cover is a delicate one. By virtue of the difficulties in cultivating a reliable stable of candid contacts, sports reporters can become inadvertent agenda setters, with reportage often reflective of access to players and the results of any one particular match or tournament.

As a means of examining the extent to which the aforementioned factors influence the work of sports reporters, and to further highlight other factors which might contribute to the way sports are reported in Australia, I used the coverage of Asian football in Australia as a case study to highlight how journalistic theories such as agenda setting, notions of *sportive nationalism* and a variety of other cultural and linguistic barriers impact the way Asian football is reported on in Australia, and the way this coverage reflects broader journalistic trends.

### Methodology

The research strategy underpinning this study is participant observation. Writing on the topic, sociologist Danny Jorgensen says that through participant observation, “it is possible to describe what goes on, who or what

is involved, when and where things happen, how they occur, and why – at least from the standpoint of participants – things happen as they do in particular situations.” (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 12). Fellow academic David Gray writes that the “central intent of this method is to generate data through observing and listening to people in their natural setting, and to discover their social meanings and interpretations of their own activities.” (Gray, 2009, p. 397).

With the intention of “observing and listening to people in their natural setting,” I travelled to Qatar for ten days in January 2011, where Australia’s national mens football team – commonly known as the Socceroos – took part in the group stage of the Asian Cup. From Qatar, I filed three feature articles for News Limited magazine *Australian Football Weekly*, as well as several opinion pieces for sports website “The Roar.” As part of this participant observation, I spoke with a number of prominent football journalists, including Fox Sports’ commentator Simon Hill, television reporter and Asian football expert Scott McIntyre of the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) and veteran print journalist Michael Lynch of Fairfax newspaper, *The Age*. Specifically, I asked them what they thought about Asian football coverage in Australia and why it received comparatively little media coverage compared to other sports, and this informal process was intended to elicit more candid responses than a formal interview process may otherwise have yielded.

Upon my return to Australia, I undertook a two-week internship at Fairfax online publication *Brisbane Times*, where my duties as an intern on the sports round coincided with the conclusion of Australia’s domestic football season, the A-League, and the start of Asia’s premier club competition, the AFC Champions League. I also read a number of books relating to the subject, including Jesse Fink’s “15 Days in June,” Craig Foster’s “Fozz On Football” and “One Fantastic Goal” by Trevor Thompson, with a view to better understanding the historical context of Australia’s switch to the Asian Football Confederation.

In order to place the case study in sufficient context, it is first necessary to understand the factors which lead to the current relationship between Australian and Asian football, as well as to background the circumstances in which competitions between Australian and Asian teams are conducted. This background helps to place in relief the context within which Australian journalists interact with sources in coverage of such competitions. It also assists to frame the object of the case study; that is, to what extent is the interaction between sports journalists and their sources responsible for shaping the general public consciousness of the relevant sport?

## Project Background

In 2014, the finals of the football World Cup – widely regarded as the most lucrative sporting event in the world in terms of revenue generated – take place in Brazil. For the second tournament in succession, Australia will attempt to qualify for the World Cup finals through Asia, having recently switched from the relative backwaters of the Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) to the world's largest football confederation in terms of members, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC).

The switch was not only intended to raise the standards of Australia's first fully professional football league, the A-League, but also to strengthen the connection between Australian football and the AFC. However, linguistic barriers and a lack of understanding of Asian football have amounted to a kind of self-censorship in the Australian media, with Australian players who excel in Asian leagues routinely ignored and the achievements of Asian clubs in international competitions often misunderstood in a regional context. As such, my article seeks to explore why Asian football receives comparatively little coverage in the Australian mainstream media.

## Australia joins the AFC

On 1 January 2006, Football Federation Australia (FFA) joined the Asian Football Confederation. The move came exactly one year after the FFA was born from the ashes of Soccer Australia, an organisation tarnished by the demise of the old National Soccer League (NSL) and allegations of corruption.

The driving force behind the creation of the FFA was billionaire construction magnate Frank Lowy, a long-time football advocate and former chairman of NSL club Sydney City. Despite dominating the first decade of the NSL, Lowy withdrew Sydney City from the competition in 1987, saying later there was “too much politics” (Fink, 2007, p. 18) in football in Australia for him to play an active role in the sport.

However, Lowy did reacquaint himself with football after the 2003 “Report of the Independent Soccer Review Committee” – subsequently known as the Crawford Report – recommended a major overhaul of football governance in Australia. The board of Soccer Australia resigned en masse, and a hastily convened FFA board chaired by Lowy was established in 2005. One of Lowy's stated ambitions was for Australia to leave the Oceania Football Confederation and join the politically powerful AFC.

It wasn't the first time Australia had attempted to join the AFC, with the maiden effort coming as early as 1964. That move came just four years after the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA) suspended what was then known as the Australian Soccer Association, after several Australian clubs had signed European players without obtaining permission from either FIFA or their former clubs. The ban lasted for three years, until the payment of a significant fine saw Australia readmitted into FIFA's ranks.

Joining the AFC proved a more difficult task, and with many Asian nations wary of admitting the physically imposing Australians, the 1964 attempt was vetoed by the overwhelming majority of AFC members. Australia tried again after resigning from the OFC in 1972, but opposition was fierce according to the former head of Australian Soccer, Sir Arthur George, who reapplied for membership at the AFC Congress in Tehran in 1974. “At the Congress, some of the members were fearful that Australia would denigrate them and make sure that no Asian won the competition,” (Fink, 2007, p. 114) George said after Australia's application was once again denied.

By the 1990s, Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating was calling for closer cultural and economic ties with Asia, and he spearheaded the first Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Leaders' (APEC) meeting in Seattle in 1993. Yet relations between the AFC and Australia showed few signs of improvement, particularly after Keating labelled Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad a “recalcitrant” (Shenon, 1993) for not attending the inaugural APEC summit. With AFC headquarters based in Kuala Lumpur, it wasn't until Qatar-born businessman Mohamed Bin Hammam took over as AFC President in 2002 that Australia finally gained some support in the corridors of Asian power.

Bin Hammam's ascension to power coincided with the Crawford Report's call for the reform of football governance in Australia. With Lowy already earmarked as the future chairman of the FFA, he travelled to Kuala Lumpur to meet with Bin Hammam in December 2004, where the topic of Australia's entry into the AFC was broached. The pair met again in Sydney less than four months later, and soon after it was agreed in principle that Australia would become the 46<sup>th</sup> member of the AFC.

Much had changed in the forty years since Australia's first frustrated attempts to join. Not only had the confederation grown into FIFA's largest international governing body, but commercial interests were booming, and member nations had access to four-and-a-half places in the World Cup finals.

The move to Asia suited both Australia and the AFC. “The benefits weren’t just limited to an easier route to the World Cup and regular international matches, but the chance to open up commercial opportunities and create business partnerships where traditional means – trade, diplomacy – had failed” (Fink, 2007, p. 114). In return, the AFC benefited from the addition of an Australian national team featuring a number of marketable stars who play their club football in the globally popular English Premier League, as well as greater access to business in the English-speaking world. “As well as being a developed football nation, Australia brings a developed economy and this is what we want in football,” (Thompson, 2006, p. 152) said Bin Hammam.

Despite the incentives – an easier path to the World Cup finals, regular fixtures at club and international level, greater commercial investment – the switch to Asia has not been universally applauded in Australia. The mainstream media has been slow to recognise the benefits of the move, and in contrast to journalists specialising in political, business and travel reporting, many sports reporters profess little knowledge of Asia and its football.

### **A question of national identity?**

Craig Foster represented Australia twenty-nine times during his playing days. Now chief football analyst at SBS and a regular newspaper columnist for Fairfax, Foster is arguably Australia’s most recognisable football analyst. In his 2010 book “Fozz On Football,” Foster argues that “national styles and culture” play a vital role in defining football identities and says Australia’s cultural heritage as a British colony has heavily influenced the playing style of the Australian national team. Nevertheless, Foster does not analyse how switching to the AFC and playing teams from Asia might alter Australia’s playing style, instead suggesting Australia should use European and South American methods to improve both technically and tactically.

From an historical perspective, Foster’s linkage of Australia’s playing style with its British colonial past is understandable. Football was first played in Australia by British settlers in the nineteenth century and in June 1879, Tasmanian club New Town took on Cricketers in what is now regarded as the first organised game of association football played in Australia. Informal matches and casual “kickabouts” had taken place throughout the colonies from as early as the 1850’s, but a brief match report in Hobart’s *The Mercury*

suggests the clash between New Town and Cricketers on June 9, 1879 was the first recorded game of organised football played in Australia.

### **New Town vs Cricketers**

“These clubs met for the return match on Marsh’s ground, New Town, on Saturday afternoon, playing the English Association Rules. The result was a draw, no goals being kicked by either side.” (The Mercury, 1879).

Although football has more than one hundred and thirty years of history in Australia, it was not until a post-Second World War migration boom in the 1950’s that the game began to develop a popular following as a spectator sport. An influx of migrants from predominantly southern and central European countries led to the creation of new football clubs with strong ethnic links, many of whom went on to form the core of Australia’s first national sporting competition, the NSL. However, while Foster acknowledges the important role European migrants played in shaping Australia’s national football identity, he overlooks the effect Australia’s recent move into Asia might have on that identity.

Foster’s take on Australia’s place in the football world is consistent with those who view the sport through the prism of minor football nations taking on an established European and South American order. According to Australian sports historian Richard Cashman, it was American academic John Hoberman who coined the phrase *sportive nationalism* “to refer to the practice in which sporting success is equated with national self-assertion and worth.” (Cashman, 2002, p. 233) Cashman writes, “sportive nationalism is particularly prominent in relatively small nations” (Cashman, 2002, p. 233) and suggests nations such as Australia have invested vast economic resources to achieve success on the global sporting field. The desire to see Australians beat the world’s best goes some way to explaining why around fifty journalists travelled to South Africa in 2010 to report from the group stage of the football World Cup. Conversely, a press pack of just ten travelled to Qatar six months later to report on Australia’s bid to win the 2011 Asian Cup.

### **Money and the media**

Including television broadcast rights holder Fox Sports, the Australian press contingent for the 2011 Asian Cup group stage consisted of ten reporters.

Print journalists Michael Lynch and Marco Monteverde covered the tournament for Fairfax and News Limited respectively, while Sydney-based journalist Liam Fitzgibbon provided coverage for the Australian Associated Press (AAP). Scott McIntyre reported nightly for Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) news program “The World News” and compiled feature stories for its flagship football program “The World Game,” with Gerard Whateley providing radio and print media coverage for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). I filed feature stories for News Limited magazine *Australian Football Weekly* and opinion pieces for sports website “The Roar.” Excluding support staff, broadcast rights holders Fox Sports contributed four journalists in the form of commentators and analysts Simon Hill and Andy Harper, producer and website editor Murray Shaw and on-camera reporter Lara Pitt.

Fox Sports’ television coverage came under the auspices of a 2006 broadcast deal which saw the network pay more than \$120 million to broadcast all Socceroos games until 2013 (Football Federation Australia, 2006), excluding the finals of the World Cup. The deal was conceived as a means for Fox Sports to broadcast A-League fixtures for a period of seven years, but was signed under the proviso lucrative Socceroos fixtures were included. Thus the package included the broadcast rights for the 2007 and 2011 Asian Cup tournaments, as well as Asian Cup and World Cup qualifiers, with the World Cup finals broadcast on free-to-air network SBS.

A survey (Fox Sports, 2011) published by Fox Sports demonstrates the overall popularity of Asian football coverage screened on the network, with the two highest-rating programs broadcast by Fox Sports in its fifteen year existence both fixtures played under the banner of the Asian Football Confederation. More than 430,000 viewers tuned into the Asian-group World Cup qualifier between Australia and Uzbekistan at ANZ Stadium in Sydney in April 2010, while just under 420,000 viewers watched Australia lose in a penalty shoot-out to Japan at the 2007 Asian Cup in Vietnam. The next two most popular broadcasts feature a cricket match and a game in the National Rugby League, before football rounds out the top five with another Asian fixture, after more than 375,000 fans tuned into the Asian-group World Cup qualifier between Australia and Japan at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in June 2009.

Comparatively, Roy Morgan research figures reveal more than seven million Australians watched Australia beat Japan at the 2006 World Cup in Germany. (Morgan, 2006). The disparity in numbers can be attributed to the lower penetration of pay television in Australian households, with the 2006 World Cup match broadcast exclusively by free-to-air channel SBS (The

Age, 2006). The figures highlight one of the most obvious problems for media practitioners covering Asian football: although broadcasting Asian football is increasingly lucrative for television rights holders, the percentage of Australians who watch Asian football differs markedly between pay and free-to-air TV.

Anecdotal evidence suggests fewer Australians are aware of football’s Asian Cup than the World Cup. Returning to John Hoberman’s academic theory of “sportive nationalism,” it appears many of the seven million Australians who watched the Socceroos’ clash with Japan in 2006 did so as a means of using “sporting success to measure national self-assertion and worth.” In other words, millions of viewers who tuned in showed little reverence for the game of football or knowledge of Australia or its opponents, but rather saw the match as an opportunity for the nation to prove itself on the global sporting stage. Furthermore, while viewing figures suggest Australians are aware of the global significance of the football World Cup – in part owing to our British heritage – historical and cultural links between Australia and the Asian Cup are virtually non-existent.

### The practitioner’s perspective

“I think it’s fair to say that the move to Asia hasn’t yet caught the imagination of the public – in fact, it may never do so – although changing demographics in Australia could help,” Fox Sports commentator Simon Hill told me. “In my opinion, the basic problem is that Australia has never seen itself as Asian despite the geographic locale – and there are many in Asia who are of a similar view of Australia. People in Australia still tend to view the world through a European prism and therefore Asia still isn’t really on the radar in football terms, this means fans still tend to have a European team they follow first and an Australian one as a distant second.”

Hill’s assertion that the move to Asia is yet to capture the imagination of the public is reflected in the fact that one-fifth the number of journalists who covered the World Cup in South Africa travelled to Qatar to report from the Asian Cup six months later. “Look at Fairfax, they normally would send Mike (Cockerill) and me, but here I am on my own,” said *The Age*’s Michael Lynch about working at the Asian Cup. Lynch cited cost-cutting as the main reason Fairfax sent just one reporter to the tournament, after both he and Cockerill travelled to Bangkok and Hanoi to cover the 2007 Asian Cup.

Logistical problems also play a role in the lack of Asian football coverage in Australia. *Brisbane Times*'s managing editor Conal Hanna admitted his website would feature more prominent coverage of the AFC Champions League – a club football tournament for Asia's premier teams – if Australia's 2010-11 A-League champions Brisbane Roar was not forced to wait twelve months to take part in it. Australia's domestic calendar fails to align with the AFC's, so although more than 50,000 fans turned out at Suncorp Stadium to witness Brisbane Roar win the 2010-11 A-League title in March, media momentum is lost in terms of covering the Champions League because the Roar must wait a year to take part in the Asia-wide competition.

“The Asian angle now open to A-League clubs doesn't register in the public consciousness, save for really big games such as Adelaide's Asian Champions League Final versus Gamba Osaka and Australia's World Cup qualifiers,” said Simon Hill. “Even the recent Asian Cup, where Australia reached the final, didn't grab people. In fact, I remember reading one comment online which said, ‘I won't be interested until Australia wins the European Championship’ – which, however laughable that statement is, just about sums up how people view Asia and this country.”

### Keeping Asian voices out of the media

Reporting from the Asian Cup, *The Courier Mail*'s football reporter Marco Monteverde admitted there was little enthusiasm for the tournament from the general public. “Australians just don't care,” was Monteverde's succinct summation, although he worked tirelessly to file daily reports.

Monteverde's match report from Australia's 1-1 group-stage draw with Korea Republic highlights how agenda setting can hinder the public's knowledge of Asian footballers (Monteverde, 2011). Eager to obtain quotes from the South Korean players, Monteverde and I spoke to midfielder Ki Sung-Yueng who spent five years at Brisbane school John Paul College before returning to his native country. Ki admitted to Monteverde and I that his side altered their tactics to counter the physically imposing Socceroos, but despite this newsworthy admission, Monteverde's match report made no mention of the midfielder's frank assessment, with the journalist later suggesting most Australian fans “don't have a clue who Ki is.”

A similarly popular media target before and after the clash with South Korea was Socceroos defender Sasa Oggenovski. Born in Melbourne, the central defender played with A-League clubs Brisbane Roar and Adelaide United

before joining South Korean side Seongnam Ilhwa in 2009. A well respected player at the K-League club, Oggenovski was soon appointed captain and lead the South Korean side to the AFC Champions League title in 2010. His knowledge of Asian football made him an obvious interview candidate, however the normally affable Oggenovski originally refused to speak to Monteverde, blaming *The Courier Mail* journalist for a rift between him and former Brisbane Roar coach Frank Farina. Only a hasty apology from Monteverde resolved the situation, highlighting just how difficult it can be to provide balanced journalism in an environment in which personality clashes often hinder the ability to obtain information and quotes.

### Playing globally, reporting locally

On the topic of why Asian football struggles to gain more mainstream media exposure, Simon Hill argues the traditional Australian sports media is still dominated by an “old-world” mentality. “The vastness of Australia and lack of transport options lead to the development of sporting competitions that were, historically, inter-district tournaments – anything else was too far away, too remote. That parochial mindset exists even today, despite cheap air travel and the internet, and in a way it's understandable – the clubs have built huge rivalries down the years, while the players live locally and are recognisable faces,” Hill said. “As a consequence, newspaper editors and television executives reflect this, and pay little regard to football in general – a national competition with few local rivalries – and Asian football. Many Asian-literate football fans in Australia blame the bigwigs for this – but it's my experience that sadly they are only reflecting the public's general disinterest. Newspapers, TV and radio exist to make money and executives and editors aren't stupid. They only give the public what they think they want,” he said.

Hill's bleak assessment isn't quite matched by SBS reporter Scott McIntyre, who highlights changing media attitudes towards football since the advent of the A-League. “For those very few of us in the Australian media who have been reporting on Asian football there is a clearly defined shift post-2005,” McIntyre told me. “It is truly hard to believe the amount of coverage here now compared to the time prior to the AFC switch. On one level it's comforting to know that Australian football fans, clubs and sponsors are finally engaging with the region but there is still a lot to be done.”

Like Hill, former Tokyo resident McIntyre believes the influence of domestic codes plays a major role in how football is covered. “The other major sports

in Australia are primarily domestic codes whose reach and outlook isn't international. In both cases they organise the premier domestic sporting codes here in Australia and as such have little or no interest in looking at the regional or indeed global outlook for their sports," McIntyre said. He argues a lack of journalists familiar with Asian football and the region is one of the reasons Australian sports fans remain largely unaware of the football being played on their doorstep. "One of the key changes needed in the future is to keep engaging media analysts who are familiar with the region – those who have played or lived and worked closely with the game in the region – particularly those with language skills who can report first-hand rather than relying on second-hand reports or those who spend significant time on the ground," McIntyre said. "As we've seen though with Robbie Slater on Fox Sports News pronouncing Kashima as 'Cashmere' three times, or *The Daily Telegraph* here referring to FC Tokyo as both Tokyo FC and Tokyo United, there's still a lot to learn about engagement at a real level."

### From goalkeepers to gate-keepers

Local biases and language barriers may play a role in keeping Asian football stories out of the Australian media, however casual indifference is another powerful obstacle. Although Socceroos striker Josh Kennedy finished equal top scorer in Japan's J. League in 2010 – widely regarded as Asia's premier domestic league – his withdrawal through injury from the 2011 Asian Cup received substantially less on-going media coverage than the overall fitness of Australian team-mate Tim Cahill, who plays his club football for English Premier League side Everton. Similarly, Socceroos defender Jon McKain went through an Asian Cup played in the unfamiliar surrounds of Qatar unquestioned by journalists, despite playing his club football across the border with Saudi club Al-Nassr.

The popularity of English football in Australia and this country's long-standing cultural links with Britain has another potentially pernicious effect on media coverage of the Asian game, with most influential positions within the Australian football media held by English-born journalists. TV ratings suggest the English Premier League remains widely popular with Australian sports fans, (Astra, 2009) yet the impact of English editors on Australian football coverage is yet to be explored. Even when links between England and Asian football are tenuous, Australian media outlets traditionally defer to English-born journalists.

### Conclusion

Reflecting on my time in Qatar and on the sports desk at *Brisbane Times*, I posited the question; to what extent does agenda setting, in line with the particular structures of the Australian sports field, provide a form of reportage that might limit the broader consciousness of sports followers of the changing face of their favourite game? Focusing specifically on how that question relates to the coverage of Asian football, I concluded that a number of factors play a role in limiting the scope of Asian football coverage in Australia, and thereby contribute to the lack of fan engagement with the Asian game. Agenda setting by media outlets is prominent, with print publications and television coverage favouring sports stories with a local angle over those from an international perspective. Where publications and TV media are open to the prospect of increasing Asian football coverage, indications suggest a lack of cultural and historical ties to Asia leaves fans largely disinterested in Asian football.

Despite the increasingly globalised nature of media, professional sports teams remain deeply entrenched members of local communities, and this unique cultural economy inhibits broader media coverage of teams involved in both local and international competitions. With sports reporters beholden to editorial policies which emphasise a close local relationship, journalists are afforded little scope to expand their analyses beyond match reports and content featuring heavy focus on readily identifiable players. The strict control imposed on player access also has a role in limiting coverage and clubs are increasingly wary of exposing their players to the media. This means sports reporting can lack colour and depth, with terse match reports predominant and a cadre of favoured players often relied upon for quotes. Language barriers further complicate reporting between Australian journalists and Asian sides and not surprisingly, English-speaking Asian players are almost exclusively sort out for interviews at major tournaments such as the Asian Cup, thereby limiting the diversity of voices heard.

Australia's close cultural ties to Britain and the popularity of the English Premier League with football fans make it difficult to expand coverage of the Asian game. With football already a minority sport in terms of media coverage in Australia, the A-League and English football dominate news stories, pushing coverage of Asian football to the fringe. That may change over time, however coverage of Asian football has not increased exponentially with the initial surge of interest the switch to the Asian Football Confederation generated in 2005.

The general indifference with which many Australian journalists approach Asian football is another hindrance. Several football journalists ignored my requests for information, whilst a number of football publications did not send a reporter to the Asian Cup. The general under-reporting of players at Asian clubs is mirrored by an unwillingness to liaise with Asian media personnel, reflecting an insular and inward-looking sports media focused largely on producing local and domestic content.

With Australia set to host the 2015 Asian Cup, media coverage of Asian football may increase as the tournament draws near. However, as my research has indicated, the question of why Asian football receives comparably little media coverage in relation to other sports produces a multi-faceted response. Expected to work within the constraints of a sports journalism system which values timeliness over thoroughness, is often parochial and which is heavily skewed towards local-interest stories, sports reporting outside of this framework is difficult. Moreover, while a new generation of Asian-savvy sports journalists may ultimately produce more in-depth analyses of Asian football and how it relates to the Australian game, my research suggests media coverage of Asian football in Australia is commensurate with current public interest.

If the interaction between sports journalists and their sources is largely responsible for shaping public consciousness of Asian football, a change of practices in the field of sports reporting may be required for sports journalists to broaden their knowledge of Asian football and thus provide more balanced and informed coverage of the Asian game.

The change will require the cooperation of both journalists and editors, for it is the latter who possess the editorial authority to re-shape the sports journalism field into a model more closely associated with other journalistic rounds. Sports media departments will also play a role, particularly where interaction between Asian clubs and Australian journalists is concerned, while the provision of access to sources remains critical. Lastly, audience engagement and profitability are also key. While agenda setting plays an obvious role in impeding Australians' knowledge of Asian football, so too does fan disinterest contribute to the lack of tangible economic benefits for media outlets providing coverage of the Asian game. Thus a cycle occurs whereby media outlets are reluctant to cover Asian football for an audience disinterested in receiving it, reflecting the current trend of Asian football receiving comparatively little coverage in the Australian media in relation to other sports.

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