Kathryn M. Brown

GSI Melody Pugh

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Reading between the Lines: How *The Ann Arbor News* Made up Your Mind

Establishing a binary is not usually desired in a newspaper article that is supposed to be unbiased. It can however, be effective as a catalyst to rally proponents of opposing viewpoints. *The Ann Arbor News* (*The News*) article investigating the academics of University of Michigan student athletes accomplished exactly this in pitting student athletes against the general student population. Without provocation, the “student” versus “student athlete” label does not matter to the average undergrad. It is only when this contrast is exploited that it becomes a means to create a binary, a reality *The Ann Arbor News* takes full advantage of. Newspaper articles are not expected to be divisive because traditionally, they adhere to a separate standard: unbiased reporting of information and several perspectives, ultimately allowing the reader to draw his own conclusions. Because of this, little to no rhetorical strategy was expected. Yet, when viewing this medium of discourse in a more global context, undertones of rhetorical strategies made it more persuasive than solely factual in nature so the article served a larger purpose: instigating people enough to talk about the reality of a “student athlete” at the University of Michigan.

One strategy *The News* employs to provoke people about student athletes was a subjective presentation of their findings. *The News* believed it would discover something controversial just by investigating the University for seven months, allocating substantial time and resources, and running a four-part series. This not only implicitly implies they believe a problem exists, but also a receptive, concerned audience exists, as well.

The manner in which *The News* establishes the concerned, receptive audience is well-planned. Because Ann Arbor is a college town, *The News* inherentlyknew its readership identified with, or had at least heard of, Michigan sports. The student athlete population at the University gives non-athletes and even people not affiliated with the University, a means of constituting themselves as a maize and blue wearing, “Hail to the Victors!” shouting group collectively renowned as the “Michigan Wolverines.” The “Wolverine” identity functions as a vital thread tying a very diverse university and town together. Thus, the student athlete population becomes a very convenient group for *The News* to target to provoke a broad range of readers that all call themselves “Michigan Wolverines.” As the article progresses, *The News* increasingly refers only to the most popular, revenue-producing sports: football, men’s basketball, and hockey to use the power of name recognition. Towards the end of the article, the scope narrows further to only football players. It is not by chance *The News* used the team most universally identified with by fans.

Clearly, the “athlete” aspect of the student athlete identity receives greater attention from the general public because more people relate to that aspect. *The News* goes to great lengths to continue to emphasize the athlete portion. Noting the term “athlete” as a terministic screen here is important. *The News* never uses the term “student-athlete.” This screen deflects the reality of the “student” side. Although this distinction may seem inconsequential, subconscious effects take root. As a reader, when I continuously see “athlete,” it evokes thoughts of practice and competition, not late night study sessions, and defines “athletes” as this uniquely separate group removed from the degree-seeking undergraduate student population. By *The News* blatantly omitting the term “student athlete,” they question the very reality of a student-athlete. In certain places in the discourse, the constituting of “athletes” versus “student-athletes” became much more obvious. For example, quoted athletes were sometimes credited only by their athletic achievement. Jake Long’s quote was attributed to “the All-American left tackle” (“Athletes Steered to Prof” 8). This was not an isolated occurrence: Chad Kolarik reduced to “the second leading scorer on this season’s top-ranked Michigan hockey team” (“Athletes ‘Safe Harbor’” 22) and Reuben Riley becomes just “the lineman” (“Athletes Steered to Prof” 7). This subversive move to constitute athletes exemplifies the less than objective article presentation and really makes the reader forget about the academic demands on college athletes.

Not to suggest the academics of the athletes were left out; they were not. However, the layout and amount of information about personal academics further contributed to the biased presentation by *The News*. Publishing several of the athletes’ personal GPAs was an unnecessary amount of information and made me balk as a reader (“Athletes Steered to Prof” 3). I dismissed how the GPAs supported the larger argument. Rather, I thought about how *The News* obtained those kinds of records and if they were in violation of University policy. By publishing personal academic records, *The News*’ intent seemed not only biased, but sinister and malicious.

In the latter half of the articles, *The News* made a move to broaden its audience by appealing to those who may sympathize with student athletes. They did this by very purposefully prefacing their quotes and using a layout that makes the reader think a certain way. For example, the way the quote was prefaced-through sentences or by a header- often gave readers a preconceived bias before reading the actual quote. Specifically, quotes from football players said Shari Acho, the co-director of the Academic Success Program, Associate Athletic Director, and Academic Football Counselor, encouraged them to pursue a degree in general studies. Next, Acho was directly quoted saying, “I think every student decides on whatever degree program they want to go into.” With this contradiction in mind, the next paragraph summarizes the career aspirations of football players Alan Branch, Steve Breaston, and Pierre Woods, who wanted to major in history, English, and film and video, respectively. All ended up majoring in general studies and Acho’s quote about “the flexibility in the program” allowing students to “create programs of study that really interest them” immediately follows the dashed future goals of the football players (“Athletes ‘Safe Harbor’” 24). *The News* really demonized Shari Acho here through the use and location of quotes that made it easily apparent what she said directly contradicted the football players’ experiences. Thus, the layout of quotes was yet another rhetorical strategy employed by *The News* to make a primarily emotional appeal and broaden readership.

Essentially, the lack of objectivity by *The News* forces the point they skirted around: athletes cannot be, or are not, students. Throughout the article, *The News* deflected the reality of a “student-athlete” and used terministic screens to construct the athlete group the way it wanted the audience to interpret it. The implicit construction of another group is equally important: the non athletes who consequently, also comprise part of the audience. Although rarely specifically referred to, in identifying athletes and investigating their academic lives, the rest of the students at Michigan are excluded. One such example of this came forth during the discussion of the popularity of the general studies degree among student athletes. *The News* wrote “…a degree program ignored by Michigan undergraduates on the whole, yet embraced by the school’s athletes…” (“Athletes ‘Safe Harbor’” 22). This statement delineated two distinct groups and drew a line in a place that effectively placed outside the degree-seeking undergraduate population of Michigan students. Clearly, *The News* did not equate “Michigan undergraduates” with “the school’s athletes.” Again, the label difference is exploited here to establish a binary that automatically pits these two groups against each other and acknowledges that each is separate, but not equal.

In constituting these relatively disparate groups, both end up feeling marginalized. The athletes likely feel demeaned and misrepresented and the general student population probably resents the seemingly preferential treatment for athletes. The distinctions *The News* makes between student athletes and general undergrads is achieved through subjective reporting and rhetorical techniques. By doing this, *The News* suggests a larger truth: student athletes are not and/or cannot be students too. If student athletes cannot be both, as *The News* suggests, then it begs the same question on a greater scale: can the University be competitive both athletically and academically?