Lance Armstrong’s hero narrative and PEDs discourse in American TV broadcasts

Sada Reed & Allison Forbes, Arizona State University, USA
“Myths” in U.S. sports media

• Journalists present people, events through lens of seven common myths (e.g., hero, villain, victim)

• Constructed narratives, reflect humankind’s values and vices
  – Help organize media messages
  – Can oversimplify people and events
The Hero Myth: Elements

1. Humble beginning(s)
2. Adversity
3. Athlete triumphs (or dies trying)
Journalists need to look past athletes’ vices to construct and to maintain this myth.

This is in conflict with American journalism’s traditional responsibilities.
Earlier study: Hero Narrative

- A hero narrative present in 44 of the 109 American print and online articles (40.4% of sample)
  - 15 of the 22 sports journalists (68.2%)
- Adjectives like “hero,” “virtual saint,” “the best ever,” “godlike,” “saintly,” “supergenes,” “America’s greatest untarnished sports icon,” “aberration,” “greatest cyclist in history,” “different from competitors, most mere mortals,” and “product of a miracle,” among others
American sports journalists did not examine reporting techniques, routines, and culture

Instead:
• Armstrong’s [poor] character
• How “we” as fans are disappointed in sports figures, cheating
• If good Armstrong did outweighs bad
This study

- Reports ranged from 10 seconds to 6 minutes, 20 seconds in length.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent of Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FNC</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Reporters *described* Armstrong in ways that embodied the hero myth in 56 reports, or about 28% of the sample
  • No statistically significant difference between networks and reporters’ descriptions

• Sources and Armstrong himself
  • 12 reports (6% of sample) and 8 reports (4%) respectively
Visual portrayals

- 105 segments (52.5%) displayed hero myth
- Only five instances where a segment had hero myth, and did not also show him in a yellow jersey or wearing a yellow Livestrong bracelet, $X^2 (1, N = 198) = 52.813, p < .001.$
Visual portrayals

- Varied significantly between networks
- Effect of airing date on hero portrayal was significant, $F(68,132) = 2.17, p < .001$
• Using a **hero narrative** is a “normal” part of the American sports journalism
  – Many sports journalists were fans before they were journalists
  – It isn’t clear if sports journalists are consciously aware of their creation, perpetuation.
  – Type of imagery changed as myth changed