

Heroes and villains: discursive strategies for (re)producing ‘myths’ of national identity in the newspaper coverage of international football

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore, taking a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, some of the discursive strategies employed by British newspapers to construct representations of national identity and unity in the reporting of a major sporting event. Taking the concept of ‘nation’ to be ‘imagined’ (Anderson 1983) and thus an ‘ideologically constructed’ social group (Billig 1995), this paper considers how social representations serve to (re)produce myths of national identity through the reinforcing of national stereotypes based on narratives of heroes, villains and their deeds and the construction of social representations of in-groups and out-groups. The analysis presented in this paper supports the argument that the representation of social actors and action in news stories is clearly ideologically situated and can be used to great effect to cognitively reinforce a sense of ‘us’ v. ‘them’, a fundamental element of myths of national identity and the reiteration of collective national unity.

Keywords: football, media, critical discourse analysis, national identity.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore some of the discursive strategies used by the printed media (in this case, national newspapers) to construct representations of English national identity and national unity in the reporting of a major sporting event. My analytical focus will be on the story of a particular football match - a quarter-final match of the 2006 World Cup, between England and Portugal - and specifically how an incident which occurred during the football match is represented in the stories published on the front pages of three British newspapers the following day.

The methodological approach is that of critical discourse analysis (CDA), a problem-oriented approach to the study of language as a social practice (Fairclough 1992; Fairclough and Wodak 1997) which takes the context in which language is used into particular consideration. CDA embraces a multidisciplinary and eclectic approach to

focusing on a particular social issue (Van Dijk 2001), taking as a central tenet the dialectical relationship between discourse and society, in that discourse constitutes socio-cultural practices as well as being constituted, or shaped, by them (Fairclough & Wodak 1997). For Van Dijk (1991, 1998, 2001, 2006), the ‘interface’ that links discourse and society is cognition, thus providing the general framework through which ideologies (understood as social belief systems) are (re)produced, maintained or challenged. Ideologies are not characterized by truth values but by their “effectiveness and functions for the cognitive organization and reproduction of groups” (Van Dijk 1991: 37).

2. Nations and national identity

The two most widely discussed conceptions of ‘nation’, *i.e.*, a political formation or a culturally defined concept based on, say, ethnicity or a common language, are problematic for many reasons, not least of which is the fact that some nations do not fit neatly into either category (Wodak *et al.* 1999). The concept of ‘England’ as a nation is a clear example of this. I will therefore follow Anderson’s (1983) definition of a nation as an ‘imagined’ community since the members of even the smallest nation will never know the majority of their fellow members, yet in their minds is the image of communion. This ‘imagined’ character of the nation lends itself well to social constructionist theory, for it rests on the assumption that nations do not exist outside social practices. Although the term ‘nation’ doubtless carries both temporal (historic) and spatial (geographic) dimensions besides being a social category based on perceived similarities, it is primarily ideological in nature (Billig 1995).

Van Dijk (1991) argues that ideologies are social belief systems, shared by social groups, which are acquired, employed and transformed in social situations. Thus “an ideology is not characterized by its truth value, but by its effectiveness and functions for the cognitive organization and reproduction of groups” (*ibid.*: 37). Although national rhetoric is obviously used as a tool for mass mobilisation in times of war and other crises, it is not only through crises that national identities are created: even in the most politically stable nation-states, national identities are re-produced on a daily basis, often in a banal, mundane and barely noticed way (Billig 1995). One of the ways in which national identity is manifested and shaped in everyday social practices is through the discursive practices of the media.

3. Sports events, the media and national identity

The prominent role that the mass media plays in the (re)construction and dissemination of national discourses has been much discussed (*e.g.*, Van Dijk 1988; 1991, 2000; Gellner 1994; Guibernau 1996). Sport seems to be an arena of social

life where it is particularly acceptable to make nationalism salient. Bishop and Jaworski (2003) claim that the press coverage of international sporting events is an especially rich site for the study of national identity, and as Billig (1995) has noted, the sports pages of newspapers provide ample opportunities for vigorous and unrestrained national 'flag-waving', which may be seen as 'banal rehearsals' for times of crisis when the state needs to call upon its citizens to make sacrifices in the name of the nation. Modern sport, he argues, "has a social and political significance which extends, via the media, far beyond the players and spectators" (1995: 120).

The general focus of this paper, on how the reporting of high-profile sporting events such as international football in the media plays a role in the discursive construction of national identity, is not a new approach (see, for example, Alabarces *et al.* 2001; Back *et al.* 2001; Crolley & Hand 2002; Inthorn 2002; Bishop & Jaworski 2003; Garland 2004; Tzanelli 2006). These studies confirm that the discursive strategies of *assimilation* (the construction of intra-national sameness) and *dissimilation* (the construction of national differences) (De Cillia *et al.* 1999) are indeed present: a sense of 'us', or a national collectivity of the self, and 'them', the 'others', who do not belong to the 'nation', is consistently created through sports coverage in the media. It follows logically that the implied reader of these reports is positioned as a member of this homogeneous collective - the imagined nation - in order to appeal to the very human need of 'belonging' and thus simultaneously to reinforce national unity (Bishop and Jaworski 2003).

4. Myths of national identity

One of the ways in which a sense of national identity is perpetuated is through the creation and propagation of national 'myths' (*cf.* Barthes 1957), which transmit messages about what it means to be a particular nationality (Hall 1997a). Back *et al.* (2001) claim that sport is a place where national myths are reconfigured and redefined. Alabarces *et al.* (2001) argue that national football breeds 'foundation myths' of national superiority which pervade in both daily life and media discourse. Sport, along with its coverage in the press, can thus be compared to war and state funerals in its capacity to act as an 'ubiquitous metonym' for the concept of a nation.

If the national team is victorious in a sporting match, the ensuing celebrations make it easy for the media to construct discourses of positive national identity and national unity (*e.g.*, Tzanelli 2006). But what if the result is a defeat for the national side, especially in a knock-out tournament like the final stage of the World Cup? Such a defeat cannot, of course, go unreported; indeed a final stage World Cup match will invariably make the front-page news the following day. So how are the national media

to go about turning a disappointing and even humiliating defeat into a discourse of assimilation and positive self-presentation? It is upon some of the discursive strategies used to accomplish this that I will focus in my analysis.

5. The context

In the summer of 2006, the football World Cup, arguably the biggest of all mega-sports events, was watched by billions around the globe, providing a welcome respite from the harsh realities of world politics in the 21st century. England had not won the World Cup since 1966, and indeed in recent football competitions the England team had failed to deliver an outstanding performance. However, the team entering the final stages of this World Cup was widely touted as being the best England had produced since the ‘glory’ years of the 1960s. The mood was one of excitement and anticipation, giving rise to an almost unprecedented display of nationalism in terms of sport. According to an article in the *Observer*, 10.5 million St George flags were bought and displayed in the month of June, with 27% of English adults buying at least one of these flags.¹ The opportunity to forge a sense of national unity in the build-up to and opening games of the tournament was clear, and the media responded in full.

On July 1st, England met Portugal in the quarter-finals of the tournament. At the end of normal playing time, and extra playing time, no goals had been scored, so the match was decided on a penalty shoot-out. The Portuguese team won the match by 3-1 on penalties, and the English team was thus knocked out of the tournament.

The incident on which my analysis focuses is the sending off of the England striker Wayne Rooney for violent conduct, which occurred in the second half of the match and left the England team reduced to ten men. A potential hero’s role had been reserved for the 20-year-old ‘star’ of the English team, Wayne Rooney, on whom the nation had pinned their hopes for his goal-scoring ability. However, Rooney is also well known for his ill-discipline on the pitch. On the day, not only did he fail to produce a goal but he was sent off by the referee for violent conduct. Also crucial to the story-telling is the equally high-profile 20-year-old Portuguese ‘*superputo*’,² Cristiano Ronaldo, also well-known for his goal-scoring talents. Moreover, Ronaldo and Rooney happen to be team-mates at Manchester United football club.

1. Conn (2006). The same newspaper article also reported an increase of 36% in beer sales, and a 40% increase in sales of pizzas and barbeque food, revealing the festive mood of the nation during this month.

2. ‘*Superputo*’, or ‘Super Kid’, was the epithet given to C. Ronaldo by the Portuguese popular press

6. Data and method

The main data used for the analysis are three front-page stories which appeared the following day (Sunday July 2nd) in the weekly newspapers the *Observer*, the *Mail on Sunday* and the *Sunday Mirror*. All three are around 1,000 words in length. The newspapers were chosen for their different formats and readership: the *Observer* is the sister paper of the daily broadsheet the *Guardian*, noted for its left-of-centre, professional, well-educated target readership; the *Mail on Sunday* is the sister paper of the *Daily Mail*, one of the best-selling British newspapers, which claims to be the voice of 'Middle England', standing for conservative, right-wing values; the *Sunday Mirror* is a sensationalist tabloid, although it traditionally claims to have left-wing, working class sympathies. The reason for choosing articles from the main news sections of the papers, rather than the sports sections, was that these articles can be supposed to have been read by a much larger and wider readership, whilst the sports pages, which tend to have coverage of a more technical nature, have a more restricted appeal.

Producing news stories is more than just a straightforward reporting of the facts. According to Fairclough (2003), news stories have both a referential and an explanatory intention, which involves making sense of particular events by focalisation; in other words, by drawing them into a relation which incorporates a particular point of view. A typical news story does not report the events in chronological order, but 'focalises' a particular aspect of the story, includes and excludes certain parts and sets up relationships between the events and characters. The journalist is, then, the professional storyteller of the mass media age (Bell 1991). As Fairclough (2003: 85) states, "making news is a heavily interpretive and constructive process" Thus, from a constructionist standpoint, the narrative of a story is ideologically situated.

A football match readily adapts itself to a narrative structure, as the match itself has a well-defined movement through time and it has a clear endpoint: the result. However, bearing in mind that the referential and explanatory intentions of the news-makers will be ideologically situated, the construction of a football match narrative can vary a great deal. It is only natural, for example, that the narratives of the story of a football match differ according to whether they are told from the point of view of the winner or the loser. As Van Leeuwen (1995: 81) notes, "different ways of representing social action encode different interpretations of, and different attitudes to, the social actions represented".

The method of analysis aims to reveal some of the strategies involved in the construction of in-groups and out-groups, which, as Reisigl and Wodak (2001) claim, forms the very foundation of nationalist discourse. Although there are many discursive strategies that can be used to accomplish this, I focus on the use of strategies for positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation by concentrating specifically on

the syntactic and semantic representation of social action and social actors. In other words, how is the 'incident' constructed in relation to the story? What are the specific roles of participants in events? Are the social actors represented as responsible agents ('Actor'), or targets/victims of the action ('Affected')? Which referential and predicational strategies are used to represent them? (see Van Dijk 1991, 2000; Van Leeuwen 1995; 1996; Reisigl & Wodak 2001; Fairclough 2003).

7. Data analysis

The front page news in the British national press on Sunday July 2nd was bound to cover the result of the eagerly awaited Portugal-England World Cup quarter-final. However, the defeat of the England team in a penalty shoot-out, for the fifth time in a major national tournament since 1990, was not news to make a nation proud. In the face of a national team's defeat, which makes collective positive representation of the team, and, by extension, the nation, problematic, sometimes positive self-presentation can be constructed by the elevation of an individual team-member to the status of national hero. Indeed, one of the prevalent themes in media representation of national football is the construction of individual heroes, which is embedded in a long tradition of elevating sports personalities to heroic or epic status (Alabarces *et al.* 2001). Hobsbawn (1990) argues that through mega-sports events, sports personalities, in representing their nation or state, become primary expressions of their imagined communities. As Wodak *et al.* (1999) note, many people do not see athletic achievements as individual, but as *pars pro toto* for their country. In this way, the discursive construction of identities assigned to sports personalities can come to represent collective national identity.

In the build-up to this game, there were two potential candidates for this honour amongst the England team. The captain, David Beckham, was thought to be almost certainly playing his last major international tournament as England captain, due to his age, and as such the anticipation for a fitting end to this career was high. The other candidate was Wayne Rooney, a young striker who is highly rated for his scoring capacity and whose re-appearance in the national squad after some months of injury was also greatly anticipated.

However, on the day, neither one presented an opportunity for the recounting of heroic actions. David Beckham was substituted at the beginning of the second half of the match, having failed to perform to the expected standard and apparently having suffered a slight injury to his foot. Having lost Beckham, the hopes of the team and the expectant nation were pinned even more firmly on Wayne Rooney. However, just ten minutes later, Rooney was sent off by the referee for violent conduct, having failed to score.

In two of our three newspaper stories, this incident is referred to in the headline, thus topicalising it by making it a salient event in the retelling of the story (Fairclough 2003; Van Dijk 2000). The front page of the *Observer* ran the following headline above a photo of Wayne Rooney looking up at the red card signalling his sending-off:

- (1) THE END: England pay the penalty after Rooney sees red

There is a seemingly deliberate ambiguity in this headline. Rooney is well-known in Britain for his quick temper and tendency towards on-pitch anger and ill-discipline, thus 'seeing red' is not merely a reference to his 'seeing' (literally) the red card, as suggested by the accompanying photo, but is also a metaphor for losing his temper. Although the 'penalty' that England paid, *i.e.*, being forced out of the tournament, is semantically related to Rooney 'seeing red' by a temporal clause, there are two possible readings here. If we interpret the headline as referring to the actual events (England lose on penalties *after* Rooney is sent off) the semantic relation does indeed appear to be temporal. However, if we read it in the idiomatic sense, there is a different interpretation, *i.e.*, the forfeit that England had to pay *after* Rooney became angry was the end of their participation in the tournament. In this case, the connector 'after' seems to mark a more causal relationship, perhaps laying the blame for England's defeat on Rooney's anger and loss of control.

Although the fact that Rooney "was shown the red card" is mentioned in the lead paragraph as one of the key events of the "dramatic game", the incident is only mentioned once more in the course of the article (extract (2)). The reference here is short, but leaves us in no doubt as to Rooney's agency in the incident. Although he is represented as 'Affected' in the actual event (*i.e.*, he was sent off (*by the referee*)), we are now informed of the reason *for* this sending off: "for stamping on Ricardo Carvalho". The lexical choice of 'stamping' is a clear reference to his agency in his fate, for the verb 'to stamp on' implies an intentional, violent act.

- (2) Within minutes of Beckham's substitution, Rooney joined him on the bench, *sent off for stamping on Ricardo Carvalho*. [emphasis is mine]

The front page headline of the *Mail on Sunday* makes no mention of the fact that Rooney was sent off. Although the second paragraph of the story does make a short reference to the incident, no explanation of why it happened comes until about half way through the article (extract (3)):

- (3) Rooney was sent off in the 62nd minute. The *volatile 20-year-old*, tormented by shirt-tugging defenders, had *stamped on* the groin of Ricardo Carvalho, then *shoved* Ronaldo in the ensuing melee. After the red card, Rooney *vanished* into the dressing room and did not emerge even after the final whistle. [emphases are mine]

Here, as in the *Observer*, Rooney is reported as having “stamped on” Ricardo Carvalho and even more damningly the recipient of this violent action is specified as being “the groin” of Ricardo Carvalho. To be able to ‘stamp on’ someone’s groin, it is a necessary requirement that he must be on the ground, and thus in a position of defenselessness, making the action appear even more violent in nature. Furthermore, Rooney is said to have “shoved” Ronaldo, again a forceful, deliberate action. His behaviour is explained by the predicational strategy of referring to him as a “volatile 20-year-old”, which can be interpreted as meaning that he is immature and unable to control his feelings and actions, and whose reaction to being “tormented by shirt-tugging defenders” was thus predictable. After being sent off, he is reported as having “vanished” into the dressing room, implying his lack of sportsmanship.

A further paragraph in the story reiterates the volatile nature of the player by referring to his “hot temper” and his “short temper”, claiming that he “had promised to keep his temper under control” in the face of likely provocation, but on the day he failed to do so, thus breaking his promise. Thus the expected ‘hero’ of the England squad is in fact given a very negative representation. The only voice which is included in his defence is that of his uncle, who by his very kinship can be supposed to be biased.

There is no evidence, then, in what we have seen so far of the reporting of the incident in the *Observer* and the *Mail on Sunday*, which could serve as positive self-representation, and thus bolster a feeling of national pride. So, if ‘our’ actions and qualities cannot be positively presented, the obvious strategy is to emphasize the negative actions and qualities of ‘them’, the out-group. As already noted, in sports reporting there is a tendency to construct ‘heroes’ who come to stand for and represent the in-group. If this cannot be achieved, there may be an attempt to construct the opposite character, the villain, who can be blamed for the outcome of events and thus the negative actions of the in-group are de-emphasized. The villain is sometimes found ‘within’, being presented at best as ‘letting the side down’ and at worst as a national ‘traitor’ who must subsequently be excluded, at least temporarily, from the in-group. In the case of Rooney, there certainly seem to be discursive moves towards this in the reporting of the incident that we have examined so far.

However, where possible, it would make more sense to construct a villain from the out-group. The process of ‘othering’, or marking of difference, is indeed essential to nationalist discourses. ‘We’ know what it is to be English, for example, not only because of certain characteristics that ‘we’ have, but also because of characteristics ‘we’ do not have, whereas others do. In other words, the sense of ‘self’ is largely based on a marked, binary opposition with ‘the other’ (Hall 1997b).

The role of principal villain in the story constructed by the *Sunday Mirror* is reserved for a Portuguese player, Cristiano Ronaldo. Extract (4) shows the enormous headline which covered the entire front page of the *Sunday Mirror*.

(4) OUR DREAM IN ROOINS

England battle to end after Ronaldo gets Roo sent off.

The sub-headline has the same syntactic pattern as the *Observer* headline (extract 1 above), with two 'events' in the story semantically linked by a temporal clause introduced by *after*. Here, the temporal clause attributes the role of 'Actor' to Cristiano Ronaldo, who is made responsible for what happened to Rooney (his sending off). *After* (and/or *because*?) this happened, the England team had to metaphorically 'battle' to the end, reduced to just ten players.

The text of the story appears on page 2 of the newspaper, under a further banner headline (extract (5)) which introduces Ronaldo as the agent of a 'crime', implying that he 'robbed' England of a chance of victory. In an apparent direct quote, Rooney refers to Ronaldo as a 'cheat' and promises never to play with him again.

(5) ROBBED BY RON

Roo: I'll never play with that cheat again

The use of the preposition 'with' can only be understood if the reader has the background knowledge that Rooney and Ronaldo are team-mates at the English football club Manchester United. The topicalisation of this in the headline would appear to be suggesting a dimension of 'traitor' to the 'crimes' of theft and cheating, despite the obvious fact that in this particular game the players were playing *against* each other in their respective national sides.

Unlike our other two stories, the *Sunday Mirror* report focuses exclusively on the Rooney incident for the first few paragraphs of the story (extract (6)):

(6) WAYNE ROONEY last night sensationally accused Cristiano Ronaldo of deliberately getting him sent off - as England crashed out of the World Cup.

He revealed that Ronaldo spoke to him just before the game and said: "I am going to get you sent off."

Rooney, in tears and raging, told fellow players in the dressing room: "I can never play with him again. I am going to f***** sort him out."

TV cameras caught the moment, before kick off, when cocky Ronaldo whispered in Rooney's ear then butted his neck. Rooney looked bewildered.

Then in the 61st minute cheating Ronaldo kept his word - charging to the ref Horacio Elizondo to badger him into showing England's talisman the red card for a seemingly accidental clash when Rooney trod on Ricardo Carvalho's groin as he tried to get away from two Portuguese players who were holding him down.

As Rooney headed off slimy Ronaldo had the cheek to wink smugly to his coach Phil Scolari.

The report begins with Rooney's post-match 'accusation' of Ronaldo having deliberately got him sent off. Besides framing the story which follows, this aims to give credibility to the newspaper's recounting of events by providing a kind of first-hand witness statement, from one of the players actually involved in the incident. The 'revelation' that Ronaldo spoke to Rooney before the match, apparently threatening him, is again supported by a direct quote (apparently from Ronaldo). This is backed up by supposed 'evidence' from TV cameras which caught Ronaldo whispering in Rooney's ear before butting Rooney's neck – an aggressive, violent act.

Against this framing, it is no surprise that the actual incident on the pitch is portrayed in a very different manner to the accounts I have already analysed in the other articles. The cause of the red card is reported as having been a 'seemingly accidental clash'. Besides the disclaimer 'seemingly accidental', it is noticeable that no *individual* Actor is given agency in this noun phrase – it is suggested that the two players 'clashed' *with each other*. Rooney is then said to have *trodden* on Carvalho's groin: the verb 'to tread' certainly not implying the intentional, violent action of 'stamping' reported in the *Observer* and the *Mail on Sunday*. Moreover, the following clause, "as he tried to get away from two Portuguese players", explains and justifies the 'accidental' nature of the action. The Portuguese players are further described as "holding him down", implying a breaking of the rules, and rather different from the *Mail on Sunday's* account of 'shirt-tugging defenders' (extract (3) above).

Ronaldo is reported to have 'charged over' to the referee to 'badger' him into showing a red card. Thus the referee's action is accounted for by this unsportsmanlike, or 'cheating' behaviour on the part of Ronaldo, who has thus apparently 'kept his word' to get Rooney sent off. Rooney, meanwhile, comes out of the incident entirely free of any blame.

Ronaldo is consistently referred to throughout the report by negative predicational strategies. He is "cocky Ronaldo", "cheating Ronaldo" and "slimy Ronaldo" ('slimy' being a negative stereotype often applied by the English to southern Europeans). Furthermore, as Rooney left the pitch, Ronaldo "had the cheek to wink smugly at his coach". This wink, which had been caught by television cameras, was printed as a still photograph to accompany the story, with the caption "You winker... Ronaldo winks after decision". There is no indication from the picture as to who Ronaldo's 'wink' was in fact aimed at, for it is a close up of Ronaldo's face and the 'recipient' is of course out of the picture, if indeed it was an intentional wink at someone in the first place. However, the 'meaning' of the photograph is anchored by the text which accompanies it: the conjunction of written text and image produce and 'fix' meaning (Barthes 1977; Hall 1997b).

Having thus represented the incident using forceful strategies of negative other-presentation, the news story then goes about setting up a feeling of inclusive, in-group unity:

- (7) Rooney's angry vow will mean the end of Ronaldo's career at Old Trafford with *all of England* furious at his scheming. [emphasis is mine]

In extract (7), it is claimed that Rooney's previously reported 'angry vow' (*i.e.*, never to play with Ronaldo again, and 'to f***ing sort him out'— see extract (6)) will lead to Ronaldo's exclusion from the English club Manchester United (referred to metonymically by the name of the stadium where they are based). What is more, Rooney will be backed up by "all of England". This inclusive, synecdochal use of 'England' is assuming every citizen of the English nation to be 'furious at his scheming', thus implying that any citizen who does not feel that way is not truly 'English', or part of the in-group of national collectivity.

Extract 8, which comes later in the article, reinforces this idea, now appealing to the in-group of 'decent fans' who believe in the 'spirit of the game'. This presumably includes all English fans, who are not, in fact, generally noted for their 'decency' and 'game spirit'.

- (8) Ronaldo's behaviour will have sickened every decent fan and made a mockery of the spirit of the game.

Yet another photograph of Ronaldo on the following page is set against the following boxed text (extract 9):

- (9) VILLAIN OF THE DAY
ONE nominee... one verdict... Cristiano Ronaldo.
Leave our shores and don't come back.

Ronaldo has now been set up and specifically named as the "villain" of the story. His 'punishment' is to be expulsion and banishment from "our" land in an interdiscursive move borrowing from the xenophobic, nationalist, exclusionist discourse normally reserved by the popular press for migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers.

Given that Ronaldo is clearly one of the most highly paid figures in club football, and since his obvious talent means that he would have no shortage of other options in club football even if he were 'forced' to leave Manchester, we might view this tabloid hyperbole as being somewhat laughable and of no real consequence. However, the *Sunday Mirror's* representation of the Rooney incident, forefronting Ronaldo's apparent involvement, became the basis of a story that was to dominate the British media

coverage of the World Cup for the next week, particularly, but not exclusively, in the popular press. The *Mail*, which, we should recall, made no attempt to involve Ronaldo in the incident the day after the match, ran the following headline on July 4th:

- (10) Get lost Ronaldo! English football will be better without the antics of this devious, diving, spiteful boy

Two days later, on July 6th, the *Mail* was implicating the whole Portuguese team in conspiring to play unfairly:

- (11) Portugal's surprise progress to the semi-finals has been marked by allegations of gamesmanship and diving

By July 7th, a whole page of the newspaper was devoted to an article entitled "TEACH YOURSELF CHEATING with Portugal's 'Big Phil' Scolari", claiming that "Portugal are the most cynical team at the World Cup".

The *Guardian* also picked up on the story during the following week, although in a generally more cautious manner. References to the Rooney-Ronaldo story, the unfair tactics of the Portuguese team and the 'treason' of fellow (English Club football) team-mates were generally made by using direct quotes (from 'experts' such as other English players, for example), in an attempt to distance the voice of the newspaper from the accusations.

Thus the incident rapidly came to carry a connotative meaning which functions at the level of 'myth': the Portuguese (firstly Ronaldo, and then, in the following days, the whole team and perhaps, by extension, the whole Portuguese nation) are conspiring, cynical cheats. It can be argued that through an implicit process of binary or polarized stereotypical representation, what the 'other' is, the 'self' is not. The 'Portuguese' are heterotypically represented as 'cheats', whereas the 'English' adhere to the principal of 'fair play'. Ultimately, then, 'our' defeat has been at least in part attributed to 'their' cheating, meaning that 'we' at least can rejoice in the comfort of 'our' knowledge that 'we' are honest, fair and know what game spirit is. This supports Garland's 2004: 89) findings that the tabloid coverage of English football is based on a "kind of introspective nationalistic identity defined more by what it is *not*, rather than what it actually *is*". The irony is, of course, rather obvious: in order to reproduce and reinforce this myth of national superiority based on a code of 'English fair play and decency', the British media has resorted to very dirty tactics indeed.

8. Conclusions

Although a complete analysis of the three articles in terms of the discourse of national identity has not been possible in this paper, I have tried to show how the representation of social action and actors in news stories is ideologically situated and can be used to reinforce a sense of 'us' v. 'them', which in turn reproduces 'myths' of national identity and thus reiterates a sense of national collectivity. As van Dijk (2000) argues, media discourse is the main source of people's knowledge, attitudes and ideologies and it is therefore crucial to analyse the structures and strategies of news stories and how they are embedded in a social context.

What is particularly interesting in this analysis is the way in which the tabloid representation of a seemingly small incident in a football match, which was initially represented by other newspapers as being just that – one small incident in the match – was seized upon and blown up out of all proportion by almost the entire British press in the following days, with Cristiano Ronaldo becoming a 'villain' of epic proportions. The logical explanation for this astonishing reaction by the British press is the huge pressure that was felt to rebuild a sense of national pride, unity and positive national identity after the enormous disappointment of failing, once again, to win the World Cup. For a nation that claims to have invented the game, this is always a humiliation.

However, although the exaggerated attention that was given to this rather trivial football 'story' clearly reflects the continued importance of the symbolic power of nationalism and national identity, a feeling of wounded national pride does not in itself explain why the media goes to such lengths to propagate and perpetuate nationalist discourses. Part of the answer to this seems to lie in the fact that, in a postmodern age when globalisation and processes of acculturation may be contributing to making national identities more fragile yet the world is increasingly under threat of serious international conflict, it is vital for even the most seemingly stable nations to 'rehearse' for a time when great sacrifice may be called for in the name of the nation (Billig 1995). Furthermore, as van Dijk (1991: 37) argues, "the exercise of power in modern, democratic societies is no longer primarily coercive, but persuasive, that is, ideological". It is certain that the mass media play a fundamental role in (re)producing and disseminating ideologies such as nationalism, and that besides having an important persuasive function on an international level, discourses of nationalism can also be called upon *within* a nation as a strategy to uphold racist or xenophobic policies of inclusion/exclusion. From this point of view, the seemingly innocuous international sports stories which are found on a daily basis in the newspapers are a potent source for the reproduction of 'banal' nationalism. As Billig (1995: 7) reminds us, however, "banal" does not necessarily mean "benign".

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