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Caught between nationalism and fair reporting

The oxymoron of 'fair sports coverage' is on stark display during this crisis in the contest between India and Australia. USHA M RODRIGUES on the Australian media's responses to the cricket controversies Down Under.

The hot controversy of banning the Indian cricketer Harbhajan Singh from three test matches two days ago, and the falling out between the Australian and Indian cricket teams have caught the Australian media by surprise. The oxymoron of 'fair sports coverage' is on stark display during this crisis in the International cricket contest between India and Australia.

There are a number of issues plaguing the current cricket sports coverage from Sydney and elsewhere of the crisis, where Indian cricket team has threatened to abandon the Australian tour after two test matches. The Indian cricket players are incensed by the 'unfair' ruling on one of their players, when Australian players continue to play the game 'hard' and allegedly indulge in sledging more than any other cricket team.

The Australian media are struggling to keep up with the events and comments from cricket experts, and seem to mix-up reporting with commentary on the issue. Often, it is an accepted practice in sports coverage that reporters cover matches in a patriotic tone, but when a controversy as large as the current one erupts, it is expected that the media would keep a clear distinction between reporting the events and the subsequent commentary.

Most Australian media are covering the details as they emerge about what really happened on the playing field in Sydney during the 2nd test match. The incident of a discussion between Andrew Symonds and Harbhajan Singh during India's 1st innings brought about the official complaint against the Indian bowler and his suspension from three test matches after India lost the 2nd match. There was no supporting evidence or video footage or recording presented at the hearing to prove the allegation, but the decision was made on the basis on probability, making the 'guilty' verdict unpalatable to Indians.

The other controversy which has put the tour in jeopardy is the umpiring during the 2nd test match, including decisions made by Steve Bucknor who is not trusted by the Indian team. There were too many aggressive appeals and controversial umpiring decisions during the historic match to create a perception of an unfair game. Adding to the mix, the accusation of racism and sledging on the field took away the joy of watching cricket, but became more a spectre of theatrics by all involved.

Initially, there were some rumblings in the media about the standard of umpiring, but the critics were silenced by knowledgeable men of the sport who said that umpires are human too and umpiring is a hard job. Channel Nine, which has the broadcast rights of the current series between Australia and India, even went to orchestrate how hard it can be for an umpire to see if the ball hit the bat or not, or if the ball was going to the stumps or not when it hit the batsman's pad. It came across as a childish, desperate and patronising lesson in the game of cricket to it's perhaps more knowledgeable viewers.

Then, once the Harbhajan Singh controversy broke through, there was an attempt to cover the match as if nothing had happened. Channel Nine commentators tried to chirp up the atmosphere by ignoring the calm before the storm which was to emerge once Australians won their 16th straight victory.

However, other television channels and newspapers were more open to discussing the real issues affecting the 2nd test between India and Australia. In their early coverage, Herald Sun of News Corporation had Andrew Symonds defending his decision not to walk from the crease knowing that he was out, and then the 'monkey' calling episode, perhaps giving the Aussie an advantage over the touring Harbhajan Singh who did not have the same opportunity to defend himself.

The Australian captain Ricky Ponting has been reportedly surprised by the strong stand taken by the Indian cricket team against Harbhajan's verdict and umpiring during the 2nd test match in Sydney. The Australian media too seemed amazed by the reaction of cricket fans in India where they burnt the effigies of Ricky Ponting and Steve Buchnor, splashing the fiery pictures across their online editions.

However, the public service broadcaster - Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) - has tried to remain as neutral as possible, inviting their commentators from Australia and India to analyse the predicaments faced by the Indian and Australian players, and their boards as to how to handle the crisis without compromising anyone's pride and still save the millions of dollars the two countries are expected to earn from the popular series between the two greats of the cricket game.

Most Australian media organisations have also opened up their online blogging sites to readers to take full advantage of this controversy by inviting them to respond to expert commentaries and blogs. A majority of unscientific online polls show that the touring cricket team got an unfair deal,
whereas the blogging comments were more evenly divided in their support of the Australian and Indian teams respectively. Many ordinary Australians agree that in this ‘clash of cultures’, where certain words are interpreted as being abusive in one culture when they clearly are not considered abusive in another culture, the game of cricket is the loser.