

**Thesis Title: The role and impact of commercialism in sport and the consequences of its transformation into the entertainment industry**

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# Abstract

This thesis is a study of the role and impact of commercialism on sport, taking AFL football as a case study. More specifically, it is concerned to assess the consequences of the transformation of sport from an item of folk culture into a multi-billion dollar business within the entertainment industry. This transformation is seen more broadly as the triumph of ‘economic rationalism’, the doctrine that to more rationally organize society all social forms and all social relations should be based on market principles and be subject to market imperatives.

At the heart of this analysis is the notion of the community and its relationship with culture and indeed the role that culture plays in the interactions and bonds between citizens. A fundamental concern of this thesis is the consequences for the community as culture is transformed into nothing more than an item of entertainment.

To understand the role of ‘folk culture’ and ‘popular culture’ within the community a number of theorists have been drawn upon, including members of the Frankfurt School, Antonio Gramsci, and Pierre Bourdieu. Their ideas are expounded in the first chapter, and deployed in the chapters following.

In conducting this research the relationship between sport (as an item of popular culture) and the community became strongly evident, as did the consequences of commercialism’s increased role in sport – sport is now, more than ever dominated by economic criteria and as such the interests of the community surrounding these ‘games’ are now subordinated to commercial interests. As this thesis will show, the ultimate consequence of this is that genuine community has been undermined and made substantially weaker.

# Declaration

I Samuel Keith Duncan declare that the examinable outcome that I am submitting on this 26<sup>th</sup> day of November, 2008 to the best of my knowledge does not contain material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text of the examinable outcome

OR:

- contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the examinable outcome; and

- where the work is based on joint research or publications I have disclosed the relative contributions of the respective workers or authors.

Signed:

Samuel Keith Duncan

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# Introduction

“(Economic Rationalism) is the dogma which says that money and markets can always do everything better than governments, bureaucracies and the law. There is no point in political debate because all this just generates more insoluble conflicts. Forget about history and forget about national identity, culture and ‘society’ ...Don’t even think about public policy, national goals or nation building. It’s all futile. Just get out of the way and let prices and market forces deliver their own economically rational solutions.”<sup>1</sup>

The dominance of economic rationalism in Australia over the last two and half decades has stretched well beyond the fields of economics and politics and is now at the fundamental core of Australian culture. Within Australia – and indeed most of the world – economic rationalism’s domination of ‘culture’ has generated a fundamental shift in the role that culture has within society and the make up of the community.

Due to Australia’s continued fascination and high level of participation in the field of sport, the commercialisation of sport in Australian culture is of particular interest in analysing the consequences of economic rationalism’s emergence in Australian culture. Of particular interest is AFL football – one of Australia’s most popular cultural items. Australian Rules football is watched, played and followed by millions of Australians. The commercial shift that the game has undeniably taken in the last twenty years has been mirrored not only by other popular sports around the world, but indeed much of the world’s popular culture, and as such, it offers a fascinating case study to more widely demonstrate the implications of sport’s popularisation and the subsequent effect of this on the community.

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<sup>1</sup> M Pusey, *Integrity Under Stress: Economic Rationalism in Canberra – A Nation Building State Changes its Mind*, C.U.P., Cambridge, 1991.

Furthermore, the current domination of economic rationalism within Australian culture has meant that today, society's citizens are increasingly treated by culture manufacturers as consumers within markets, and their ability to reach the market and entice the consumers to purchase their product is now driven by the media through media advertising. Therefore, popular culture has increasingly become a construct of the media.

The influence of the media in economic rationalism's extended domination in popular culture – and in particular popular sport – should not be understated. It has, for some time now, been acknowledged as one of the most powerful and influential set of institutions in the world. The ability of these institutions to set the agenda and mood of what we talk about, and even how we talk about it, is something that has made it vitally important to society's ruling class. However, perhaps even more than this, their ability to reach the masses in an age where everything is a brand and every brand has an image and message, has made it a vehicle for many culture manufacturers to sell their product and message through the media driven phenomenon of advertising.

As a result, in the commercial and commodified generation of which we now find ourselves a part, popular culture and media advertising is at the forefront of our existence. Whether we are watching television, viewing a block-buster movie at the cinema, buying the very latest in clothing fashion, listening to the radio, running with our I-pod in hand, surfing the 'Net or watching our favourite football team, increasingly the western world appears a mass market for, and consumption of, popular culture.

As this thesis will later show through the analysis of AFL football, the relationship between society's citizens and the culture that it consumes is fundamentally different to the relationship that society shared with its culture before the emergence of economic rational objectives within Australian culture. While sport and games were once an expression that bonded society and its communities, popular sports such as AFL football are now imposed from above, manufactured by the culture industry and made with the intention of generating profits to its producers, which has ultimately weakened the communities of society.

To fully understand the commercial effect of economic rationalism and the media on AFL football, its clubs and their communities, it is first necessary to understand the notion of 'community' and how it has changed in relation to Australian culture.

# Chapter One – The Theoretical Model

## AUSTRALIAN CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

Australian federation was strongly influenced by the British Idealists inspired by Hegel.<sup>2</sup> From a Hegelian perspective, the underlying cornerstone of a political community is the active participation by its members in pursuit of the common good of the community, for a common interest and common goal, where the relationships that the members of the community have are based on shared, common values and principles. According to Hegel, it was the culture of the community that is the binding force of this relationship.<sup>3</sup>

As Hegel argued, the state was a political community because it was a cultural community, because its constitution is grounded in a national culture, because its political institutions are deeply interwoven and interdependent with all other aspects of culture and similarly, they express the character of national culture.<sup>4</sup>

He also stated that the individual identified with the state through participation within the community and that the state was responsible for fostering the ability of its members to reach their full potential. Hegel argued that if people did not find their worth or identity through the community then they would seek to do so through conspicuous consumption. Therefore, he considered it the duty of the state to ensure that the market was directed at achieving the common good of the community.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See M. Sawer, *The Ethical State? Social liberalism in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton 2003, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> See R. S. Hartman, *Introduction to the philosophy of history*, Bobbs Merrill, Indianapolis, 1953, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> G Hegal, 'Philosophy of Right,' *Encyclopedia Britannica*, London, 1952, p. 153f (section 253).

<sup>5</sup> G Hegal, 1952, Preface.

Idealists in Australia embraced and extended this theory, arguing for the importance of the community and active participation within it to achieve a true and genuine democracy.

The political thought that led to Australia's successful campaign to federate and become the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 was very much inspired by Tasmanian anti-transportation-of-convicts campaigner, John West. Before his death in 1873, West wrote seventeen essays on federation entitled 'Union of the Colonies,' and continued to write for 'Fairfax' newspapers about his vision and political ideas. The major vision expressed through these articles and essays was for Australia to have a hierarchy of elected authorities, which included voluntary organisations, local government, state government and federal government. Importantly he also called for as much decentralisation of power as possible to ensure that lower order democratic organisations in which people could be directly involved, were not suppressed. This allowed for all members of society to be as active and as willing participants in the direction and decision making of the community as possible.<sup>6</sup>

Then, towards the end of the nineteenth century, Australian political thought, embracing the goals, ethos and values of democratic federalism, was very much enriched by a new liberal, or 'social' liberal philosophy inspired by British Idealist philosopher, T.H Green. Developing Hegel's philosophy, T.H Green wrote that true democracy can only exist when all members of society are free to participate in their community. "When we speak of freedom," he wrote, "We mean a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something, and that too, something we enjoy in common with others."<sup>7</sup> Green argued that pure freedom existed in the pursuit of the common good, as for Green, liberty meant

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<sup>6</sup> A Gare, 'The Neo Liberal Assault on Australian Universities and Future of Democracy: The Philosophical Failure of a Nation,' in *Concrescence: The Australasian Journal of Process Thought*, Vol. 7, 2006, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> T.H. Green., 'Lecture on "Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract,"' in *T.H. Green: Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and Other Writings*, ed. Paul Harris and John Morrow, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 199.

the full participation in the life of the community. For a society to be truly democratic, its citizens need to be collectively active within the community.

Green was arguing for an active citizenship and a collective will, oriented to the common good. He believed that through being able to freely and collectively work for an enjoyed and common goal, individuals within society could reach their full potential. The community was integral to what Green saw as necessary in how a democracy should be defined.<sup>8</sup>

Like Hegel, Green proposed that it was the role of the state, not the market, to nurture freedom. Green argued that the state is needed to redistribute income and wealth to ensure that all members of the community are able to reach their full potential and to liberate any impediments to participation in community life and to create a healthy community. The inequality and poverty engendered by laissez-faire economics were seen to be bad not on utilitarian grounds, but because it made it impossible for people to develop their potential and function effectively as citizens of a democratic community.<sup>9</sup>

What 'idealism' meant to early Australia is most clearly evident in the work of Walter Murdoch. Murdoch, a friend of Alfred Deakin, embraced Green's philosophy, urging the importance of the state's responsibility to nurture and develop the democracy of a community was to allow citizens to reach his or her highest potential. Murdoch was a 'social liberal' who taught at 'The College,' Warrnambool, before becoming professor of English (1912) and later Chancellor of the University of Western Australia. In his best selling text book, *The Australian Citizen: An Elementary Account of Civic Rights and Duties*, Murdoch wrote that the state was responsible for allowing citizens to realise themselves by attaining a good which is common to themselves and other men, by nurturing the community.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> T. H Green, p. 199.

<sup>9</sup> T. H Green, p. 199.

<sup>10</sup> See M. Sawyer, *The Ethical State? Social liberalism in Australia*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 2003 p. 44 from Walter Murdoch, *Loose Leaves*, Melbourne: George Robertson and Co., p.64f.

Therefore it was the community that was at the heart of democracy and the relationships that the citizens had with each other. It was also the community that allowed them to actively participate for a shared and common good. This was often stimulated through the folk culture of the people, which was an expression of the common and shared lifestyle, ethos and values of the community.

To fully understand the importance of folk culture and how and why culture defined the community, we must extend the concept of what folk culture was, what its relationship to the people was, how it determined the relationships within the community and importantly, how it has changed today and what its change means for the community.

#### FROM FOLK CULTURE TO POPULR CULTURE

As mentioned earlier, Hegel suggested that folk culture defined the relationships and the common values of the community's members.<sup>11</sup> It was, first and foremost, an expression of the people, by the people, from the grass roots and was considered an uprising of common and shared values, principles and ethics of the community. It was folk culture that defined the community and its lifestyles, and as a result, it also defined the relationships that connected one member of the community to the other. It gave the community some sense of meaning.

For example, the 'games' of a community were the 'games' of the people. They were a result of the spontaneous and common spirit and expression of the people and because of that, these games were able to connect people of the community and bring them together for a common and enjoyed activity. These games were an expression of the community's culture, which in turn made them a cornerstone of the community.

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<sup>11</sup> G Hegal, '*Philosophy of Right*,' Encyclopedia Britannica, London, p. 153f (section 253).

Fundamentally, folk culture gave meaning to the community and encouraged common and active participation within the community as one citizen was able to relate, through folk culture, to another. Without this culture, citizens were merely a group of individuals.

Economic rationalism has substantially threatened the relationship that citizens and the community has with its culture. The fundamental change in culture is the shift its ownership. As stated above, folk culture is the result of an uprising of common interest and values by the people, for the people, from the grass roots. Therefore, the people of the community can boast ownership of their culture, as they are the producers of it.

Popular culture, though, is manufactured by the 'culture industry' and is aimed at a market that is willing to consume. It is designed with the intention of generating profits and rather than emerging from the common uprising of the people, it is manufactured by a small, powerful few and is imposed from the top down. Citizens do not own this culture; they consume it and create their identities through this culture. Thus, the relationship that the people have with this new, efficiently produced, image driven, branded culture is very much a monetary one, where the people 'purchase' culture or 'pay' to participate in it.

The most important consequence of this change in relationship between the people and its culture, lies with the undermining of the community. Because members of society have become consumers of culture, rather than the producers of it, the relationship that people have with each other has changed. It was folk culture that gave their relationships meaning by connecting them with each other through something in which they both felt ownership and a common and mutual understanding and appreciation. It defined their common values and principles and reflected the lifestyle of the community, which was maintained through the active participation of its citizens. If this is removed, then the citizens of the community lose that sense of connection with each other. Furthermore, the lifestyles, values and principles that were once promoted and upheld through folk culture, are now being sold to consumers by culture manufacturers. Due to the weakened connection that the citizens of a community share, the common interest and common

good of the community is more difficult to identify and therefore individual interests are placed ahead of the community. That is to say that the common good is often blurred, or unidentifiable, and the interest of the individual is placed ahead of it.

This concept can be related to the 'games' of the people through Huizinga's analysis of the 'play' element in society.

A major component of football culture is 'games.' The nature and importance of games has been illuminated by the work of Johan Huizinga on the 'play' element in society and its dissolution.

## THE COMMODIFICATION OF PLAY

In his book, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Huizinga argued that originally, the play element of society was one based on the expression of the people through spontaneous action, which was based on enjoyment and fun. He wrote that 'playing' was based on the will or the want of the people and was not serious, but rather a care-free release of energy.<sup>12</sup> He described how in the United States this had changed and furthermore, that the corruption of 'play' had undermined the 'community' within society. The element of 'play' has been incorporated into the economy and commercialised. At the elite level of almost all sports, players are becoming commodities whose labour is used by profit-seeking organisations. Play has been commodified at the same rate as, and simultaneous to sports.<sup>13</sup>

While players used to play their games for enjoyment and fitness and in doing so formed loyalties to the community and fellow players of the team or club that they represented,

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<sup>12</sup> J Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1980, p. 5-18.

<sup>13</sup> J Huizinga, p. 75.

the professionalism of the 'games' and the commodification of the 'play element' now means that professional athletes participate in games to earn money for their labour. That is to say, that the purpose of play for the players is now based on money, and the relationships that they have with the club that they represent is based on a monetary contract.

Remembering the relationship between culture and the community, from the perspective of Huizinga, 'play' was another expression of the people, particularly important in binding the people together, forming communities and uniting citizens in being active and working towards a common cause or goal. It not only allowed the communities to form, but also to connect, and gave meaning to their connection.<sup>14</sup>

If this element of society is commercialised then some sense of community is lost. If 'play' is commodified, then so too are the 'players' and their position within a team or on a team's list is not based on loyalty or the bond it shares with the team's community, but rather on a monetary contract, and as a result, individual monetary needs are often placed ahead of the team and likewise, individuals can be traded or swapped to other clubs by the team they play for, regardless of how attached they may feel to the club's community.

Fundamentally, this means that the relationship between players, play and the communities of the club is based increasingly on monetary contracts, eliminating 'play' from the game. Huizinga wrote that the corruption of 'play' has undermined the community and the connection that citizens share with games and the communities surrounding these games.<sup>15</sup> Games have become more serious and therefore, the element of 'play' has lost its spontaneous, care-free, fun characteristics and instead taken on greater elements of structure and seriousness.<sup>16</sup> Results and scores are now recorded, highlighted and used to judge those that are 'playing', while there are an ever growing

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<sup>14</sup> J Huizinga, p. 95-98.

<sup>15</sup> J Huizinga, p. 95-98.

<sup>16</sup> See also J Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987, p. 11.

number of 'player statistics' that are used to analyse and judge which players are the 'best', who, incidentally are usually rewarded with wage increases.

Therefore, not only has 'play' been incorporated into the economy and treated as a commodity, in doing so, the very definition of what 'play' is, has changed, whereby winning and achievement has replaced the spontaneous and care-free energy release that defined 'play' when it was still considered an expression of the people. At the core of 'play' now, at least at the elite and professional level of sport such as the AFL, is money. This has seen an increase in individual importance and a decline in loyalty and the bond that one player may feel towards another, or indeed the club which they are representing. Loyalty is central to the common good of a community; if this is threatened, then so too is the community.

Further consequences of the commodification of play are evident for the community. Firstly, if it is true, as Green stated, that 'freedom' within the community carries with it connotations of 'enjoying in common with others,' then surely as the play element has become more serious and commercial, the 'enjoyment' element of playing has become, at the least, different. Indeed a player must enjoy playing enough to continue playing, but once, when the play element of culture was considered an expression of the people, 'enjoyment' was at the heart of 'playing.' Now, money and contracts are the basis of any professional athlete's participation in games. And because of this binding contract, surely the player is less free, and therefore, the community is affected.

Another implication of Huizinga's theory of the corruption of play needs addressing. Because sport, and 'play' within sport, is now commodified, packaged and sold to the market, people pay more attention to the scores, the results and other aspects of note throughout the game, than ever before. The consequence of this is that perhaps in paying sporting bodies, such as the AFL, so much attention, society has become less active as a community. As people pay sport (and in particular, televised sport) so much attention, other aspects of society are overlooked and undermined. Therefore the community is harmed.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF COMMODIFIED CULTURE FOR THE COMMUNITY

Theories of the Frankfurt Institute philosophers, particularly Adorno and Horkheimer, provide further insight into this transformation. In their most famous work, *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that when culture is commodified and incorporated into the economy, efficiency and mass production is at the core of its production, therefore the mass produced manufactured culture is simplified and somewhat homogenised. This, they argued, limits the values, messages and principles that consumers are exposed to through their consumption of this culture.<sup>17</sup> The major consequence of this is that the dominant meanings and ethos associated with culture are no longer a result of a common uprising from the people, but rather enforced from the top down by ‘culture manufacturers.’

This, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, creates further problems for the community. In their essay, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that capitalist’s domination of the culture industry and the mass production of popular culture allows the ruling class to make their ideas the ‘ruling ideas’ through the messages that are portrayed through the consumption of culture. This, they argued, serves to strengthen their position at the top of the social hierarchy, while further suppressing the working class and undermining the community.<sup>18</sup>

Importantly, Adorno and Horkheimer saw the relationship of manufacturing culture and consuming it as a cycle of manipulation, which served to keep the masses at bay through their consumption of culture, while at the same time ensuring that the ruling class were consolidated at the top of the social hierarchy. They argued that mass produced culture created further demand for further popular culture – all with the same, or similar,

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<sup>17</sup> T Adorno and M Horkheimer, *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, in Curran J., (ed), *Mass Community in Society*, Edwin Arnold, 1977, p. 349-367.

<sup>18</sup> T Adorno and M Horkheimer, p. 349-367.

messages. The culture manufacturers become richer, while the poor, to use the words of Adorno and Horkheimer, “insist on the very ideology which enslaves them.”<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, from the perspective of Adorno and Horkheimer, the ‘common good’ and ‘common interest’ of a community is lost. If the culture of the community, carrying the community’s values, ethos, lifestyles and principles are no longer created from the grass roots, but instead is efficiently manufactured by a relatively small, few, powerful cultural manufacturers, who aim this culture not at communities, but rather at markets and consumers, then the fundamental connection that citizens have with their culture, and therefore each other, is flawed.

The culture is no longer a product of the community. Instead the relationship that citizens have with its culture is one based on money, and the messages portrayed through popular culture no longer serve to represent and connect the community, but instead are designed to create further demand for popular culture, keep the masses content with their position in society and further entrench the power of the ruling class. This renders the community less genuine because the culture connecting the community’s citizens is not spontaneously generated, but is enforced from above with the economic objective of making money.

Furthermore, it is in their leisure time – a time that once allowed communities to celebrate their existence – that citizens are continually suppressed through their consumption of popular culture. As Adorno and Horkheimer wrote, “The man with leisure time has to accept what the culture manufacturers offer him.”<sup>20</sup>

Adorno and Horkheimer saw leisure time as a tool used by the ruling class to make money by selling their popular culture to society’s consumers, who would consume this

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<sup>19</sup> T Adorno and M Horkheimer, p. 359.

<sup>20</sup> T Adorno and M Horkheimer, p. 352.

culture as a means of escaping their otherwise boring existence. Yet, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, while they are consuming popular culture, they are simply escaping into a world that, through the sameness and limited messages of the culture, serves to legitimise capitalism.

Furthermore, they claimed that the fact that culture is imposed from the 'top' carries further consequences for the citizens of society. They argued that popular culture promotes myths and ideals that serve to keep the masses content with the existing *status quo*. From an Adorno and Horkheimer perspective, items of popular culture such as AFL football, promote ideals and myths such as upward social mobility and that often the weak can and do succeed against the strong. However, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that this is often not the case and that, "The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises."<sup>21</sup>

Note that it is the changing nature of culture, and more to the point, its transformation from folk culture to popular culture, that Adorno and Horkheimer saw as the core of the decline of the 'real' community. Because society's relationship with its culture is underlined by money and because the citizens of the community have lost ownership of the ideals and meanings represented through culture, it has also lost the power of its culture and the connection it has with it. Therefore, the community is exposed to the power of the culture manufacturers through the very culture they consume.

## ORGANISATION OF CONSENT

This is an aspect of what Antonio Gramsci characterised as the 'organisation of consent', or 'cultural/ideological hegemony.' For Karl Marx, in his discussion of class struggle and conflict, 'economic determinism' was of foremost importance in explaining ruling class domination.<sup>22</sup> For Gramsci though, it was culture that was of most significance in

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<sup>21</sup> T Adorno and M Horkheimer, p. 363.

<sup>22</sup> K Marx, *Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, in T Bottomore and M Rubel (eds.), Penguin, Hammondsorth, 1963, p.93.

maintaining and upholding the dominant ideologies and status quo of society. This is fundamental to the idea of ideological hegemony.

He wrote of hegemony as:

a cultural and ideological means whereby the dominant groups in society, including fundamentally, but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the spontaneous consent of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups.<sup>23</sup>

From a Gramscian point of view, through the culture industry, subordinated groups are persuaded by the ruling class to accept their moral, cultural and political views. Before culture was incorporated into the economy it was the citizens of the community that had such power.<sup>24</sup>

While Gramsci saw that ruling class domination was more negotiated than did Adorno and Horkheimer, both of their arguments centre on the assumption that culture is a part of the economy and produced by culture manufacturers with the intention of making profits. In doing so, it is the cultural manufacturers that have ownership of the culture and the citizens of the community have a connection with this culture that is underlined by money. Thus, relationships within the community are no longer based upon the shared and common values expressed through their culture and because of that, the connection that one member of the community has with another is undermined. From the perspective of Adorno and Horkheimer and even Gramsci, this renders the community less genuine with participation within the cultural field less associated with the 'common good' and more about 'escapism.'

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<sup>23</sup> Lawrence and Wishart, *Selections from the Prison Notebook of Antonio Gramsci*, Gramsci, in Q Hoare and G Nowell-Smith (eds), London, 1971, p. 57-58.

<sup>24</sup> A Gramsci, p. 57-58.

The topic of escapism as an aspect of cultural hegemony in sport is one that is discussed by Noam Chomsky. Although Chomsky acknowledges that he does not know a great deal about sport and does not wish to say much about it, what he does say contributes to Gramsci's work on the organisation of consent.

In his book, '*Understanding Power*,' Chomsky noted that while we have experts within the sporting field, every supporter of the game thinks of himself or herself as a type of expert too. They often believe that their expertise and knowledge of the game is as good as those who are paid to analyse the game. They believe that their comments and thoughts are as valid as any so called 'expert', and as a result, feel comfortable ringing in or writing in to challenge any coach or expert on any issue of the game. Chomsky noted that this is unusual and almost unique to sport.<sup>25</sup>

This gives rise to the key point of escapism and distraction. Chomsky noted that their willingness to challenge any expert shows that supporters give much of their time and attention to sport, which therefore shows that they cannot be giving the required attention to the real, political and social issues that fundamentally change and affect their lives far more than the result of a football match.<sup>26</sup> Chomsky wrote that professional sport merely serves to distract the working class from their real needs and from the real needs of the community.

From Chomsky's perspective, by following any football team, we form unreasonable and irrational loyalties to them considering few of us know the players in the team we support personally, and should they lose, our lives remain relatively unaffected. However, by following these teams, Chomsky suggests that it ensures our passion is diverted away

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<sup>25</sup> N Chomsky, *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky*, in R Mitchell and J Schoeffel (eds.), Scribe Publications, Carlton North, 2002, p.98-101.

<sup>26</sup> N Chomsky, p. 98-101.

from challenging the existing status quo and from being active citizens within the community.<sup>27</sup>

Note that Chomsky is concerned not directly with the community, but with sport's impact on democracy as it promotes escapism or distraction from the real needs of the community and active participation within it. The commercialism of culture has meant that citizens find it increasingly difficult to connect with the community and to be active within it because they are distracted by popular culture. Professional, commercialised sport, according to Chomsky, ensures that people are 'distracted' from being active participants within the community and its real issues.<sup>28</sup>

Before culture was incorporated into the economy, it was folk culture (such as sport) that stimulated such active participation within the community and provided a connection between citizens of society to form a democratic society.

#### THE POSTMODERN DEFENCE OF COMMODIFICATION

The above theories, I believe, are fundamental in understanding what has happened to culture in the age of economic rationalism and what the consequences of this change has been for the community. And, as will be seen throughout the thesis it can be related to AFL football and the changes it has endured over the last two decades and the direction it looks set to take in the future and used as a case study to represent most, if not all, popular culture.

However, it should be noted that there has been, and continues to be, increasing opposition to the above 'modernist' theories – those of deconstructive postmodernism, who generally reject the notion that the commercialisation of culture has in any way undermined the community and democracy. In fact, as Robert Frank revealed in 'One

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<sup>27</sup> N Chomsky, p. 98-101.

<sup>28</sup> N Chomsky, p. 98-101.

market under God,' these deconstructive postmodernists celebrate today's popular culture.<sup>29</sup> This is highlighted and expounded in chapter seven of this thesis. However, it is difficult to define precisely what postmodernism really is. This will become clear as I discuss it below.

Generally, postmodern theorists tend to reject any claim that there are dominant ideologies, dominant meanings and dominant narratives. Indeed, at their most basic, they tend to reject the notion of high culture and low culture. They also tend to reject the distinction between mass culture, popular culture and folk culture. For the postmodernist there is simply and solely 'culture.'

Postmodernists tend to maintain that all texts are characterised by the fact that there are many varying readings of any one text. There are different interpretations, understandings and meanings that can be taken from any given text. This, of course, would include the very definition of 'postmodernism,' which, by definition, has a plethora of meanings and therefore can be never fully determined.

What can be determined though, is that postmodernists are generally opposed to all grand, meta or mega narratives, theories and discourses, and as a result, postmodernism can be defined as something which is built on multiple meanings – many narratives, with many, varying positions for the spectator to take. As Baudrillard claims, "the abundance of meanings, that can be taken from the realities of signs, signifiers and other representations, means that there can be no grand, meta narratives or meanings – there can be no appeal to a higher truth."<sup>30</sup>

In his book, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Terry Eagleton builds on this point with his definition of postmodern thought.

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<sup>29</sup> T Frank, *One market under God: extreme capitalism, market populism and the end of economic democracy*, Vintage, London, 2002, p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> See T Woods, *Beginning Post Modernism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999, p.195.

Postmodernity is a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations, which breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of nature and the coherence of identities.<sup>31</sup>

Importantly, postmodernism is far more celebratory towards popular culture than are most modernists, to the point where Lawrence Grossberg suggests that popular culture is a place where individuals can empower themselves, and supports this by claiming that there are many ways to produce and credit mass culture with subversive or progressive potential.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly Dick Hebdige claimed that popular culture can “celebrate the power of sub cultural forms simultaneously to bind together social groups and to express the plurality of cultural and ethical experience.”<sup>33</sup> From the perspective of Hebdige, popular culture, such as AFL football, can bind together people of difference and form new communities based on their popular culture experience. Rather than undermining communities, popular culture strengthens bonds between society in bringing together the masses for a common and enjoyed experience.

Furthermore, the suspicion that postmodernism carries about the grand narratives and truth, places it in opposition with several of the modernist theorists that have been

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<sup>31</sup> See T Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1996, p. vii.

<sup>32</sup> See T Woods, p. 169.

<sup>33</sup> See S Connor, *Postmodern Culture: An Introduction into the Theories of the Contemporary*, Malden Mass, Blackwell, 1997, p. 207.

discussed in this chapter. If there is no grand, meta or mega narrative, there cannot be any true, single meaning or any true, single purpose that any item of popular culture portrays.

From a postmodernist perspective, culture could not hold a common, shared expression of the people, as for them, culture holds different meaning for different citizens within the community. Generally speaking, they are very sceptical of the notion of 'community' to begin with and to ends that claim to go beyond amusing oneself.

They would barely acknowledge that there are people at the autonomous side of fields, doing what they are doing for reasons other than heteronomous reasons, and if they do acknowledge them, then it would seem they deny them any respect.

Furthermore, because of this, culture could not in any way be considered hegemonic or as maintaining , legitimising or reinforcing the existing status quo and dominant ideologies of society as Adorno and Horkheimer and Gramsci suggested was the case. In fact, if the interpretation of any text is varied, then it also has the potential to be rather subversive to the dominant ideologies of society.

But if postmodern theory generally does not believe in any grand narratives or mega meanings, then how can any item of popular culture be subversive? If there is no true ideology to oppose, then the question has to be asked – subversive of what?

If postmodernists tend to hold that culture plays no role in maintaining real and genuine communities through the shared and common grand meanings of folk culture, and if they also tend to reject the notion that some players within fields do act on autonomous reasons and for reasons other than self amusement, then they would see no problem with the commercialisation of sport and the transformation of it into an industry of entertainment.

Postmodern theory is applied to the AFL and the media's development in AFL football in chapter seven, defending the progression of the media in the AFL and the AFL's relationship with the community that surrounds the game. However, even this more celebratory take on the AFL is met with rebuttals that further underlie the fact that the commercialisation and commodification of the AFL has undermined and threatened the community.

## TODAY'S COMMUNITY AND DEMOCRACY

While postmodernists would argue that the notions of 'community' and indeed 'democracy' still exist within the commercialised world of today, what defines a 'community' and, therefore, a 'democracy' now appears fundamentally different to what Australia was committed to at its founding.

Whether or not the change in what defines a democracy and community has had positive or negative consequences for society is something hotly debated by theorists. This thesis has formulated a definition of democracy based on theories of Hegel, as developed by the British Idealists beginning with T.H Green. The notion of community is also problematic. As characterised by Thomas Frank in 'One market under God: extreme capitalism, market populism and the end of economic democracy' it appears that today's definition of a community is far different to what it was understood to be at Australia's founding in 1901. Frank argues that today's definition of what constitutes a community and a democracy is based on 'individual interests' and has 'economic capital' at the core of 'freedom' within a community.

Frank discusses the American financial industry to argue the shift towards 'individual incentives' motivating citizens to participate within the community. He also argues that 'economic capital' today underlies the foundation and building blocks of a community.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> T Frank, *One market under God: extreme capitalism, market populism and the end of economic democracy*, Vintage, London, 2002, p. 92.

In doing so, Frank uses the stock exchange in America as a case study of market domination to illustrate how notions of community and democracy have been transformed. He argues that the stock exchange encourages ‘mass participation,’ meaning that for the participants of market trading, the market represents *them* and acts in *their* interest and on *their* behalf. Furthermore, in encouraging such active participation in the market, it subconsciously reinforces the democratic notions that Australia was committed to at its founding – active participation, in common with others, as a community.<sup>35</sup>

However, Frank argues that this type of community is not real. He argues that participation within the stock exchange is fundamentally based on the potential to accumulate ‘economic capital’ and, therefore, participation within the market is based more on individualism than a collective common good. Again, this is fundamentally different to the notions of democracy that Australia was committed to at its founding and, in fact, promotes and justifies economic rational ideals of free trade, privatisation, deregulation, de-unionisation and down grading of the welfare state.<sup>36</sup>

As pointed out earlier, neo Hegelian theorists believed it was the government, not the market that was responsible for ensuring its citizens had the ability to reach their potential within the community. This was considered fundamental to being ‘free’ within the community and was emphasised within Australia when it federated in 1901.

Frank argues that participants within the market celebrate *their* economy doing well however, *their* freedom was increasingly reliant upon ‘economic capital.’<sup>37</sup> This way of thinking has been extended from the stock exchange to the whole of society. Increasingly many of society’s institutions have placed the objective of ‘profit making’ at the forefront of their operation and decision making. This thesis shows how this has

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<sup>35</sup> T Frank, p. 93.

<sup>36</sup> T Frank, p. 94.

<sup>37</sup> T Frank, p. 97-98.

dominated the decisions and actions of AFL football clubs – most noticeably over the last decade. The consequences for the communities of these clubs can be highlighted by the relationship they now share with the football club they support. To make money, AFL football clubs need their supporters to actively participate in, and consume their product.

To achieve this, consumers are ‘sold’ the message that by financially supporting the institution, they will feel part of the institution’s ‘community.’ An example of this is AFL football clubs asking their supporters to support their club through purchasing a membership. In return they will feel part of the ‘team’ and the club’s community.

These communities are far different to those that were defined by Hegel and neo Hegelian theorists when culture was owned by the people. In short, when culture was ‘folk culture’ citizens did not purchase ownership of culture or their place in a community; culture was owned by the community. In fact, it was a result of the common interests of the community. It was culture that provided the community with a means of participating together for a shared and common outcome.

If it is true that today society’s citizens are required to purchase culture to justify their place in a community, their relationship with culture, and each other, is fundamentally different to what it was – it is now based on money.

Freedom may still be at the heart of today’s definition of democracy, but what defines a citizen as ‘free’ is now more and more identified with wealth and the individual ability to purchase whatever they want, whenever they want it, based on having enough economic capital to do so. It is also considered that the market, and not the government, is best equipped to provide citizens with this potential. Furthermore, it appears that today the notion of freedom is based on individual wants and needs rather than the good of the community.

These points are expounded in the following chapters of this thesis to show that what underlined Australia's democracy when it federated in 1901 is now being undermined by the way sport is being commercialised.

At no stage of this thesis am I suggesting that the 'sporting field' and, within that, the AFL, can today be expected to operate in its folk culture and pre modern form. The impact that the 'economic' field and the 'media' field have had on the 'sports' field means that sport has changed forever. Pierre Bourdieu's theories of 'capital' and 'field's provides an excellent theoretical understanding of this. It is the consequences of this change that is at the heart of this thesis.

#### WHAT IS COMMUNITY? - BOURDIEU

The fundamental point that links all of the above theory is the notion that culture has been commodified and incorporated into the economy. As already mentioned, no longer is culture integrated into the life and loves of the people as much as it once did, nor does it as much connect citizens and offer a stimulus for recognising the common good and active participation within it. It is now imposed from above, completely changing the relationship that the community has with its culture. All of the modernists discussed above believe that something is lost when relationships between people are defined through the market and, to various degrees, all believe that capitalism undermines the community, making it less genuine as making money becomes the core of both consuming and producing popular culture.

However what has not yet been made completely clear is what the community and democracy might be and what the relationship between them is. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of 'capital' and 'fields' offers a way to understand while at the same time offering an explanation of how and why society has developed through capitalist objectives.

Bourdieu's analysis of 'capital' and 'fields' provides a broader and more theoretical explanation of today's dominance of money and the market within almost all facets of society. In doing so, his philosophy can be used to tie the other theorists together and explain how and why culture became incorporated in economic values and objectives. The theorists already mentioned, while excellent in discussing the importance of culture and the consequences of culture's commodification, do, to some extent, fall short in offering an explanation of why culture became incorporated, and how culture, the community and democracy should be.

In generalising Marxist theory, Bourdieu argued that what appear to be autonomous individuals acting according to their own interests are actually products of an emergent historical system of social relations that constrain them to recognise each other and compete with each other for socially recognised forms of power, which, he describes as 'capital.'<sup>38</sup>

Bourdieu stated that capital, in the above context, is any form of power that allows actors to participate in fields to gain further capital, thereby augmenting their position in the field – for instance, social contacts (social capital), competence in deciphering cultural artefacts (cultural capital) and, most importantly, the power, deriving from prestige and authority to define reality (symbolic capital).<sup>39</sup>

Particularly important to this discussion is the fact that Bourdieu believed that generally, the different actors within each field tend to strive for capital specific to this field and independent of and autonomous to, the capital of any other field. He also held that the 'economic field' was the most dominant field and claimed that it was essential to maintain the autonomy of the other fields within society to limit the power of those with economic capital. If the prominence of economic capital (money) grows within other

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<sup>38</sup> P Bourdieu and L Wacquant, *The Logic of Fields, An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, pp. 94-115.

<sup>39</sup> PBourdieu, 1992, pp. 94-115.

fields, then economic capital will dominate these fields at the expense of all other forms of capital.<sup>40</sup> That is to say that it would disempower everyone without money.

Put simply, those with the most money would dominate every field and hold the most power and recognition. Bourdieu increasingly emphasised this point and warned of the effects of fields losing their autonomy to the economic field.

From this perspective, the field of sport is losing its autonomy to the economic field, and as a result, economic capital is what defines success and even survival. Players no longer just play for the love of the game or to participate with friends within a community. Instead they are all employed by clubs to offer their skill as a form of labour in return for monetary payments. Furthermore, those clubs with the most financial success are generally the most powerful and recognised. Therefore, the economic field has merged with the field of football and as a result, economic capital is at the forefront of the AFL.

Importantly, Bourdieu claimed that a field will lose its autonomy if the dominant actors within it strive for capital that is heteronomous to the field, as opposed to capital that is autonomous from the capital of any other field.<sup>41</sup> From the perspective of Bourdieu, we can state that if the AFL were still an autonomous field, then its players would play for autonomous capital – premierships, respect, self improvement and for the love of the game – money would not be an issue. However, as the game has become commodified and commercialised, money has become a core of its existence.

The nature of this can be further clarified through Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus.' The concept of 'habitus' relates to an individual's 'feel for the game.' Bourdieu wrote that to enter and be a successful actor within any field it is necessary to have developed the correct habitus. He defined the habitus as a transposable disposition to perceive, evaluate and act in certain ways and appreciate the value of the different forms of capital and 'feel

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<sup>40</sup> P Bourdieu, 1992, pp 94-115.

<sup>41</sup> P Bourdieu, 1992 pp 94-115.

for the game.’<sup>42</sup> This, of course, relates to the act of knowing how to act around certain people and in certain situations so as to ensure that one can gain power or direct a situation for their own benefit.

This very point can be associated with the rise in individualism and the simultaneous decline in community that is associated with the commercialisation of culture. When the actors within fields pursued capital specific to the field, the autonomy of the field is increased. Even if an actor did gain more power than most within a field, his or her power was specific to that field, limiting the power or recognition that the actor could hold in the greater society.

However, if fields lose their autonomy to the economic field, then economic capital prevails over the specific capital of the field. Money buys recognition at the expense of recognition achieved through the field. In simplified terms, if an actor in, say, the field of sport, gains power and recognition through his or her accumulation of money, then they will also have power and recognition within other fields that have also merged with the economic field. This can encourage actors within fields to act in ways that are heteronomous to the field that they are participants within, which can break down the communities of that specific field as it loses its original meaning at the expense of economic capital.

Through Bourdieu’s theory we can also say that the sporting field has dissolved into the entertainment field and is now a form of commercialised entertainment. The field functions not just for the enjoyed participation of playing and watching; it functions through relationships that are built on generating economic capital.

From the perspective of Bourdieu, the dissolution of the cultural field into the economic field means that money has become the core objective of cultural production.

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<sup>42</sup> P Bourdieu, ‘*Structures, Habitus, Practices*’, *The Logic of Practice*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 53-65.

Furthermore, through the pursuit of money within the cultural field, the culture that was once specific to a community and its lifestyles and values is now less about the community and more about making money and the means to meet this objective. The community has lost what connected its members and encouraged them to act within the community – culture autonomous from the economic field.

Because the sporting field has lost its autonomy, from the perspective of both Adorno and Horkheimer and Gramsci, it can be argued that the communities within the field are less genuine and furthermore, the distribution of economic capital within every field is severely skewed, with much of the economic capital going to just a few, and little going to the masses. Furthermore, as the masses continually strive for more economic capital through their ‘feel for the game,’ they continually act with individual interests, which, further undermines the community.

It is now undeniable that folk culture has been transformed through the market forces of capitalism and commercialism into a more commodified and commercialised ‘popular culture.’ It is not a result of the common uprising of shared values and lifestyles of the people, but rather the result of the mass production of goods by the culture industry that is aimed at and sold to the market in order to generate money. And, because of this transformation, the community surrounding the culture appears under threat. Before we can explore how such a transformation has come about in the AFL, we must first understand the current make up of the AFL as a business and as an item of popular culture in the commodified world of today. From there we can explore the AFL’s business orientation on the world stage. This will help in showing the greater consequences of the commercialisation of sport for the community.

## **Chapter Two – The Current State of the AFL: The Media and Money**

By the year 2008, the Australian Football League had become a truly national competition. It now boasts ten teams from Victoria, two from South Australia, two teams located in Western Australia, one team from New South Wales and one team from Queensland. As well as this, in the year 2008, at least one game of AFL football was played in every state and territory in Australia. Throughout the course of the season 176 matches were played, as well as nine finals played, in a period stretching 26 weeks of the year – on Friday nights, Saturday afternoons and nights and Sunday afternoons and evenings. These matches were played at twelve venues across the nation with up to six million people attending these matches live, and approximately four million people watching on television each week of the AFL season. Traditional suburban grounds such as Windy Hill, Glenferrie Oval, the Western Oval, Victoria Park, Princes Park and the Junction Oval have been replaced with state of the art sport, entertainment and multi purpose stadiums such as the ‘Telstra Dome’ (note the commercial name) and the newly refurbished Melbourne Cricket Ground.

The single most important contributing factor in the progression and direction of the VFL/AFL has been the growing interest in, and coverage of the game by the media. The growth in the media’s interest in the game and role within the game has ensured that the competition stretched far beyond the outskirts of the Victorian Capital. According to the Operations Manager of the AFL, Mr Adrian Anderson, “the AFL is the most closely examined sport in Australia and arguably the most scrutinised enterprise in Australia, considering that a full time media contingent of more than 750 journalists report on the game.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> AFL, *AFL and the Media*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), July 22 2007.

The media's coverage of the national game should not be understated. In Melbourne's number one selling newspaper, News Corporation's *The Herald Sun*, as many as ten pages from the back are dedicated entirely to the AFL, and, in the Saturday, Sunday and Monday editions of the paper, middle page 'lift-outs' of up to thirty pages are dedicated solely to sport, with the AFL being the main focus for up to seven or eight months of the year. A total daily newspaper sale in the six major cities where AFL is played is almost 2.5 million.<sup>44</sup>

Radio too, plays an extensive role in the coverage of AFL football. The latest AFL broadcasting rights negotiations saw four radio stations combine to pay up to nine million dollars to broadcast AFL matches each year for five years. This is the most money any radio broadcasting consortium has paid for the rights to broadcast AFL matches in the history of the game and the first time in over a decade that four broadcasters have held the rights to broadcast the matches. Prior to this it was two or three. In Melbourne, radio stations *'Triple M'*, *'3AW'*, *'ABC 774'* and *'SEN'* broadcast AFL matches every weekend from Friday to Sunday. As well as this they have sports programs throughout the week such as *3AW's 'Sports Tonight'*, which again makes AFL their priority from autumn to spring. The situation is very similar in Adelaide and Perth.

In the year 2004, radio station *'SEN 1116'* became the second radio station behind *'Sport 927'*, dedicated wholly to sport. Of course, in Melbourne, much of the focus is on AFL football with many of the station's hosts and personalities being ex AFL footballers or so called 'football experts.' Each weekend, radio broadcasts of AFL matches reach more than one million listeners.<sup>45</sup>

As for television, the impact and influence that this medium has had on the progression and development of the game has been profound to say the least. The latest broadcasting negotiations between the AFL and the vying broadcasters saw a record amount of money

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<sup>44</sup> AFL, *AFL and the Media*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), July 22 2007.

<sup>45</sup> AFL, *AFL and the Media*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), July 22 2007.

paid by the successful bidders to the AFL to broadcast the AFL on their network. Channels Seven and Ten paid \$780 million for the right to broadcast the AFL exclusively on their networks.<sup>46</sup> Never before in the history of the game has such a figure been reached and paid. This deal will be looked at further later in the thesis; however, what must be stated now, is that AFL football and indeed all sports now take up much of the programming schedules of all commercial and even pay television networks. Channel Seven broadcast AFL games on Friday nights and Sunday afternoons, while Channel Ten broadcast AFL matches on Saturday afternoons and Saturday nights. They also have other football related entertainment programs such as *'Before the Game,'* *'The Fifth Quarter'* and *'Beyond the Boundary'* featuring throughout their weekend scheduling of programs.

Channel Nine, who relinquished the right to broadcast AFL matches when it couldn't match Channel Seven and Ten's offer, also provide AFL and sports programs within their weekly schedule. On Thursday night they air *'The Footy Show,'* on Sunday mornings they have *'The Sunday Footy Show'* while they also have a Monday night AFL information program called *'AFL Classified.'*

*'Foxtel'*, the third broadcaster of AFL football matches, broadcasts four games per weekend live and shows all eight matches throughout the week. It also provides other football programs such as *'On the Couch'* and *'League Teams'* throughout the week.

Therefore, the media's coverage of AFL football is thorough to say the least. For television, the AFL has gone beyond the actual broadcast of the game. It is now considered a form of entertainment where other programs can be and are developed to attract large audiences. Before we discuss this further though, it should also be noted that while the media's role in covering AFL football has grown, the game itself has grown into something far different to just a game. It is now an industry and its clubs are increasingly taking on business characteristics within the business framework of the AFL.

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<sup>46</sup> AFL, *AFL and the Media*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), July 22 2007.

The AFL has gone beyond a recreational, health and leisure time pursuit. When the numbers are crunched, the figures within clubs analysed, scrutinised and reported, it can strongly be suggested that the AFL and its sixteen competing clubs are businesses, making up a large sector of the community.

The very fact that the AFL documents and publishes its annual figures and financial reports underlines the importance of the business nature of the AFL. In his annual report of 2006 titled '*An ongoing challenge*' the Chief Executive Officer of the AFL, Andrew Demetriou, describes the AFL as "a brand, a business and a form of entertainment that has to compete for the hearts and minds of Australians just as all forms of entertainment do."<sup>47</sup> In saying this, he is also calling the game a commodity. Throughout his report he also outlines the strategic directions of the AFL – many of which are objectives concerned with finance and economics, but many of which are also community based.

In 2007, the commercial operations department increased their revenue by 33% to record revenues of \$285 million. The AFL's total revenue in 2007 exceeded \$285 million for the first time, with a record net surplus, up 249% to \$26 million and an operating profit, up 45%, to \$202 million. Furthermore, this year the AFL announced that it expects to generate \$1.37 billion in revenue over the next five years.<sup>48</sup> Of this, the clubs are demanding \$2 million per year over this period, with the AFL distributing \$125.5 million to its sixteen clubs in 2007, which in itself first shows the undeniable money in football and secondly the appetite that each club has for money, if for no other reason than to survive. The need for money within the game for survival and prosperity within the AFL will be discussed further within chapter five of the thesis.

What can be stated here, though, is that as the game has developed and evolved into a business, football clubs have adopted a far greater emphasis on business and financial

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<sup>47</sup> A Demetriou, *CEO Report: An Ongoing Challenge*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), August 5 2007.

<sup>48</sup> I Anderson, *Finance and Administration Report*, online, [www.afl.com.au/Portals/0/afl\\_docs/afl\\_hq/annual\\_reports/2007/Finace\\_Legal\\_Culture.pdf](http://www.afl.com.au/Portals/0/afl_docs/afl_hq/annual_reports/2007/Finace_Legal_Culture.pdf), August 5 2007.

performance off the field. This is reflected in the structure and set up of football clubs within the AFL from the board of the club down. In the first eighty to ninety years of the VFL/AFL the boards and decision makers of each club were generally made up of ex club players and club supporters who may have also been small businessmen with some knowledge of small business – after all, that is precisely what VFL football clubs were. As the AFL has become a bigger business, the AFL club boards have been changed and moulded to reflect this. Many club boards are made up of business men who have extensive financial and accounting knowledge and who are willing to make business decisions based on financial and economic objectives.

In his article titled ‘*Gentlemen’s Code*,’ Angus Grigg points out that of the 133 board members within the sixteen AFL clubs only sixteen percent of them have played football at the highest level.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed this example can be extended to Alex Waislitz – a Collingwood board member worth tens of millions of dollars. He works on the 36<sup>th</sup> floor of a Collins Street building overlooking the MCG and Lexus Centre. He has met with presidents of the United States of America and has had many Stock Market victories – one worth \$79.97 million. Waislitz is a friend of Collingwood president Eddie McGuire and says that their approach to running the football club over the last seven years has revolved completely around business imperatives and in fact he frowns upon anyone without professional business training being a part of a football board. “You can’t afford not to be a business as the cost of fielding a football team is enormous – between \$9 million and \$12 million a year. To cover these costs you need to be more professional with your merchandising and sponsors, and the proceeds need to build a solid financial base.”<sup>50</sup> It seems then, that off field performance is as important as on field performance, for if a club cannot perform off field, then their existence on the field may be limited.

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<sup>49</sup> A Grigg, *Gentleman’s Code*, in *The AFR Magazine: supplement of the Australian Financial Review* March 2006, p. 60-70.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in A Grigg, p.60-70.

This is supported by Rex Hunt, football commentator of thirty years and 200 game player for Richmond in the 1960's and 1970's. In an interview conducted with him on this issue he said, "Yes, off field is just as important as on field...it is all part of the high pressure business that is."<sup>51</sup>

Certainly there has been plenty of money that has been incorporated within football clubs over the last few decades – from Christopher Skase, John Elliott and Geoffrey Edelston in the 1980's to David Smorgan, Joe Gutnick and Eddie McGuire in the 1990's to Paul Gardiner and Richard Pratt in the last decade, and as football becomes more and more professional, we can expect this trend to continue. But not everyone is content with this restructuring within football clubs and many have adopted a typical modernist stance on the issue, claiming that football is being transformed into something far different from the 'expression of the people' that it once was. Alex Grigg, in his article '*Gentlemen's Code*,' states that many supporters find the preoccupation of the bottom line as 'autocratic' and putting 'profit before passion.' He then states himself that in the AFL "business has taken over, turning a working man's pleasure into the ultimate power game for silvertails; a vehicle for profile building; an important box to be ticked on the resume of those wanting to make their way."<sup>52</sup>

This argument was supported by AFL football reporter Rohan Connolly in his article '*Always lurking, the Dollars now look the tearaway team.*' Within this article he writes that sport has been "hijacked by the greater god of the almighty dollar," and concludes by saying "forget about following the Demons, Dockers, Doggies or Dons. Barrack for the Dollars these days and it seems you're on a guaranteed winner".<sup>53</sup>

This suggests that Adorno and Horkheimer were right in their claims about all aspects of popular culture – that they have lost their sense of folk culture and 'bottom up

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<sup>51</sup> R Hunt *Interview*, 10 October 2006.

<sup>52</sup> A Grigg, p.60-70.

<sup>53</sup> R Connolly, *Always Lurking, the Dollar now look the tear away team*, in *The Age*, online, [www.theage.com.au](http://www.theage.com.au), 4 April 2006.

expression' and have instead been incorporated into Bourdieu's economic field and endless search for economic capital.

Interestingly sponsorship revenue within the AFL has increased by 47.5% since 2003 to now total \$242 million.<sup>54</sup> The increase in sponsorship in the AFL is directly in line with the increase in media attention and coverage that the AFL has with its national television broadcasters. Sport, sponsorship and the media share an interesting and unique relationship that will be looked at in greater detail later in the thesis.

The AFL is a business – marketed, packaged and sold. The organisation of sport, emphasis on economic objectives and the media saturation of the game have ensured that the characteristics of the AFL are increasingly different from the days of recreation, leisure and amateurism when the game was an item of folk culture. Certainly it can be argued that it is the media which is most responsible for the increasing commercialisation, commodification and branding of the game, but to fully understand the game as a commercial commodity and what the impact of this has been on the sport and its supporters, it is first necessary to attempt to show that what is happening to the AFL is indeed part of a world trend. This will then give us a better picture of how the game has changed and what is fundamentally different from when it was something that could be defined as folk culture. In doing this the future of the AFL may become a little clearer.

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<sup>54</sup> I Anderson, *Finance and Administration Report*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), July 22 2007.

## Chapter Three – A World Trend

To attain a greater understanding of the commercial trend and media dominance of popular culture and sport, it is necessary to explore how the AFL has changed in relation to other sports played around the world.

Certainly, the decrease in community, folk culture and loyalty, along with the increase in money, commercial interest and seriousness within sport is not unique to the AFL. As this chapter will show, the consequences of the media's role in sport can be discussed as a world trend, as neo liberal policy has extended to globalisation in recent decades.

While it is impossible in this thesis to analyse all sports or indeed any other sport to the extent that I will analyse AFL football, to attain an understanding of how capitalist domination of sport has been a world trend, the 'world game' of soccer can be explored to provide comparison to AFL football, showing how the progression of the AFL mirrors that of the soccer at the elite level. How the consequences of its progression have impacted upon the same stakeholders mentioned in the following chapters of this thesis can also be explored through this analysis. To fully understand how and to what extent the AFL has changed and developed, it must be looked at in relation to other world sports, and due to the extensive reach and popularity of soccer, it is the ideal game for comparison.

From the perspective of Adorno and Horkheimer, soccer has become what all other forms of culture have become – a means of making money, intrinsic to the economy, functioning on efficiency and productivity while aiming not to cultivate, but rather to profit. Indeed the money and business like structure of soccer cannot be ignored. Many soccer clubs within the English Premier League (EPL) are privately owned entities, listed on the stock exchange.<sup>55</sup> Surely this fact alone suggests that one of the key objectives of these clubs is to exist in order to provide a profitable return to their investors.

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<sup>55</sup> EPL, online, [www.premiershipleague.com](http://www.premiershipleague.com), 12 September 2007.

Such is the need, and apparent unquenchable thirst, for money within the world of soccer that most competitions carry with them the lucrative appeal of millions of dollars in prize money for the competing teams. While the premier of the AFL wins the prestige of being crowned the best team in the competition and \$600,000, with another \$400,000 going to its players,<sup>56</sup> the winner of soccer competitions, such as the World Cup, win the Title and \$25 million.<sup>57</sup> Money appears at the heart of competing; perhaps it is the main objective of competing.

This, of course, is one of the fundamental differences between the Australian Football League (AFL) and the English Premier League (EPL). The relatively small amount of money that the victors of the AFL grand final win means that the number one objective for the clubs is to win the premiership for prestige and team satisfaction, rather than financial benefits in the form of prize money. However, when the prize money at stake is as much as \$25 million, the question rises: what is more important to the club – the satisfaction and prestige associated with winning, or the financial benefits that comes with it?

This facet of the game is not restricted only to the clubs. Players are paid enormous amounts of money per match to represent their club. Unlike the AFL, the EPL imposes no salary cap or equalisation policy, meaning that each club can pay as much money as they wish to their players.<sup>58</sup> They can purchase and sell their players as they wish, for as much money as the free market will allow them to. This aspect of the game mirrors very much the free market of capitalist economies, where goods and services are bought and sold at a price determined by the market, without restriction or any form of government intervention.

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<sup>56</sup> D Barrett, *Cats cash in on flag*, in the *Herald Sun Sport*, 1 October 2007, p. 42.

<sup>57</sup> P Kent, and L David, *Guus' Golden Egg*, in the *Herald Sun*, 22 June 2006, p. 102.

<sup>58</sup> EPL, online, [www.premiershipleague.com](http://www.premiershipleague.com), 12 September 2007.

In June 2006 it was reported in the *'Herald Sun'* that former Australian national coach Guus Hiddink received an \$800,000 bonus when the 'Socceroos' advanced into the second round of the World Cup.<sup>59</sup> The earnings of the competing 'Socceroo' players per year totalled \$117 million, while their quarter final opponents, Italy, were reportedly worth \$450 million. Italy's cheapest starting eleven player, Marco Materazzi, was paid \$10 million in real wages for the year, while Australia's cheapest player, Scott Chipperfield, was paid \$2 million.<sup>60</sup> Any one team of 42 players in the AFL can receive a capped collective total of only \$7.62 million per year.

At the beginning of 2007, the world's most famous soccer player, David Beckham, signed a contract to represent the 'Los Angeles Galaxy' for \$175,000 a day for five years, which equates to \$1.2 million per week and \$320 million over the life of the contract.<sup>61</sup>

The situation is similar throughout Europe. In Spain, Real Madrid bought a host of players early this decade – namely Figo in 2000, Zidane in 2002 and Beckham in 2003 for about 2000 million euros.<sup>62</sup>

So, has money in soccer changed what it means to play the game? Certainly Huizinga would argue that the meaning of 'play' has definitely changed and taken on firm characteristics of employment and the commodification of 'play', while from the perspective of Bourdieu it is appropriate to wonder what type of capital Beckham is seeking from his contract with the 'LA Galaxy.' Certainly when a player receives up to \$320 million over five years, it is difficult to argue that they are not playing for the money. David Beckham's deal with the 'LA Galaxy' appears to be an example of this.

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<sup>59</sup> P Kent and L Lewis, *Herald Sun*, 2006

<sup>60</sup> D Davutovic, *Value for money*, in the *Herald Sun*, 26 June 2006, p. 39.

<sup>61</sup> J Ford-Rojas, V Shaw and R Williams, *Becks king of the Galaxy*, in the *Herald Sun*, 13 January 2007, p. 7.

<sup>62</sup> M Desbordes, *Marketing and football: an international perspective*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Amsterdam, 2007, p. 98.

Beckham has played in both England and Spain in what are widely recognised as the 'premier' leagues of the world. His move to the United States has meant a dramatic decrease in the quality of the competition he is playing in, but a dramatic increase in wages earned. So, is he playing for the love of the game or for the money?

This also indicates that with private ownership and no enforced salary cap, the richer clubs can purchase the better players by offering them more money than a poorer club could afford and therefore only the more wealthy clubs can truly have a chance of winning the Premier League title. The poorer clubs simply strive to be competitive.

This instance illustrates that economic capital is the most important form of power within the field of soccer as it can lead to on-field success. Put simply, this is an example of money dominating the field of soccer; those with the most money are the only teams that can win.

And, such is the capitalist and business orientation of soccer today, while the clubs mirror a business within a market, the players increasingly appear to be the providers of the labour and are treated as commodities to be bought and sold. In his book '*A Beautiful Game? Searching for the soul of football*,' David Conn writes of both Leeds and Bradford selling players to a hire purchase company based in Guernsey and then leasing them back to make more money. In this example the players were the commodity used as a means to profit. They were sold and then leased!<sup>63</sup>

This form of free trade, without restriction and intervention, is dissimilar to the AFL. As already mentioned, the AFL imposes a salary cap that, in relation to the excessive amounts paid to the EPL players, appears to be rather modest. However the fact that the AFL body does impose restrictions upon the trade and payments market means that the competition remains more equal and the power of money in on field success is

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<sup>63</sup> D Conn, *The beautiful game? Searching the soul of football*, Random House, London, 2005.

minimised. In this sense, the AFL has remained far more egalitarian than what the E PL has. This will be further analysed in the following chapters.

Also, the fact that AFL players are paid very modestly in comparison to EPL players means that player loyalty appears to be of greater significant in the AFL. Because AFL players are not paid millions and millions of dollars, other aspects of playing in the AFL such as 'mateship' and a love for the club that they are representing, are possibly of greater value to them.

The Beckham example also highlights the global nature of soccer. Beckham is perhaps the most well known sportsman in the world. His image is projected into almost all corners of the world. Likewise, within the EPL, any one club can be made up of players who have crossed national borders and continents to play together for their club. Money has lured them there and when they represent their club in competition, it is an example of globalisation at work within the industry of soccer.

It also appears that the capitalist dominance of soccer has had a negative impact on the grassroots element of the game as it has moved from an item of 'folk culture' to a business. Pay television providers own the exclusive rights to broadcast all EPL matches, which means that soccer fans have to pay to watch their team play. Also, it is becoming increasingly difficult for soccer supporters to attend matches live as ticket sales have increased to as much as \$200 (Australian) per match. As well as that, many of the grounds that play host to EPL and other English league matches have capacities of as little as 30,000.

It can be argued that the community feel of the game is being harmed here as the game is increasingly taken away from the grass roots supporter and then sold back to them with the aim of generating revenues and profits. Certainly, the game also seems to be becoming more elitist when only the more wealthy members of society can attend matches live. The supporter may feel more and more isolated as their club becomes more

and more a business, leading to a breakdown in community as the supporters are increasingly treated as consumers.

Yet part of the reason that soccer offers such a fascinating case study in comparison with AFL football and neo liberal trends, is because while it does in many ways appear to be a direct reflection of western capitalism and free markets, there are also many elements of the game that appear as egalitarian and subversive to elitism. On many levels soccer around the world serves to break down social barriers, and indeed wealth barriers, to unite people of difference in colour, culture, religion and wealth. This can be seen at both supporter level, national team level and club level.

The 'FA cup' is a competition in England held each year where teams of different levels and divisions play against each other in a knock out competition. This means that poorer teams from, say, the fourth division can compete against the richer, more successful clubs from the Premier League. Furthermore, they can succeed and even win. In 2004 a second division team, Millwall, made the FA cup final.<sup>64</sup>

The World Cup offers another example of such equality. Not only do players come together from all around the world to represent their own country, but different countries from around the world can come together to compete in one event. Africans can compete against Arabs, Europeans can compete against Americans, South Americans can take on those from Australasia and people from different countries with different religions can sit together and watch from the grand stands – Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, black people, white people, wealthy people and poorer people. Teams from 'third world' countries can play against 'first world' countries. Different styles of play from the African teams, the Europeans, the Asians and the South Americans are also on show in the one event. It is a celebration of both difference and togetherness.

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<sup>64</sup> Millwall FC, online, [www.milwell.com](http://www.milwell.com), 13 October 2007

Yet, it can be argued that the World Cup and even the FA Cup also serve to highlight some of the many inequalities in the world. The 'third world' African teams rarely succeed against the dominant and wealthy European teams and their performance is a reflection and a reminder of their financial status and lack of infrastructure in relation to their 'first world' opponents. Indeed the difference in equipment, clothing, performance and the score is often a reflection of the difference in wealth between the wealthy teams of the west and the rest.

This can also be said of the FA cup. While Millwall did make the final in 2004, they did not win and more often than not it is the wealthy teams from the Premier League who win the competition. So, while teams from all divisions can unite for one event, it is the wealthy clubs, who have the most money, that succeed. This again highlights the role of money in soccer.

Chomsky's argument about 'distraction' is also relevant here. While the poorer nations of the world are able to compete on soccer's world stage, events such as the World Cup are merely a distraction from the plight, suppression and poverty experienced by the 'third world' countries competing in the competition. The World Cup can make 'third world' countries look as though they can compete and match 'first world' countries, but it does little to help feed the hungry, house the homeless and raise the economy above the poverty line. Therefore it can be seen as a distraction and escapism from the world's inequality, but does not in any way fix the problem.

And while events such as the World Cup do indeed unite people of difference, in leagues such as the EPL, supporters from the two competing teams cannot sit together through fear of crowd violence or rioting. Thus, supporters of one team sit on one side of the ground and their opposition counterparts sit on the other. This is hardly a representation of togetherness and the breaking down of social barriers, but rather another example of exacerbating differences.

So, as the above examples show, the commercialisation and commodification of sport has been a world wide pattern, not just one reserved for AFL football. Indeed many sports such as soccer do mirror capitalism, globalisation and the free economy, some more than others.

Likewise, the increased economic and business incentives within the EPL and other forms of soccer has led to a possible threat and undermining of the community. The decrease in loyalty at the expense of money, the decline in supporter access to live and televised matches, which has led to a decline in ‘grass roots support’ and ‘folk culture,’ and the apparent thirst for money and profit at both club and player level, has meant that soccer is now only a shadow of its ‘folk culture’ origins where supporter and player interests preceded the priorities of ‘economic capital.’

The commercialisation and commodification of sport and its subsequent transformation from an item of folk culture into an item of popular culture within the entertainment industry is, in fact, a world trend, with some sports more commercially progressed than others. The following chapter aims to analyse the increasing importance and prominence of economic rationalism – a dominating world wide economic objective – in the AFL and how its prominent existence in today’s competition is in contrast to the game when it was ‘folk culture.’

## Chapter Four – The Business of AFL Football

*“The curse of commercialisation is the ruin of sport, and the degeneracy of motor racing as a sport is due to the financial issues now involved in every race...the charm disappears, and I see in the near future, and before the racing of cars dies the death that is yearly predicted, the sporting element obliterated altogether by the all devouring monster of commercialism – the curse of the Twentieth Century.”*<sup>65</sup>

This powerful statement was made by racing driver Charles Jarrot in 1905 in reference to the increasing commercialisation of his sport. Certainly his views seem to be a little ahead of his time as there can now be little dispute that commercialism and sport go hand in hand. While the consequences of the commercialisation of sport will be discussed at greater length later in the thesis, this chapter aims at understanding when and to what degree, sport, and in particular the AFL, has become a commercial enterprise, bound by the elements of finance and money making. Certainly there is little doubt that money and business characteristics have always been a part of the game, however, unlike today there was a time when the business elements and decision making within any football club were relatively minor and most definitely preceded by notions of tradition, loyalty and the community of the club. It was a time when Australian football was defined as an item of ‘folk culture.’

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<sup>65</sup> Cited in H Westerbeek and A Smith, *Sport Business in the Global Market-Place*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2003, p 89.

## THE HISTORY OF VICTORIAN FOOTBALL

The very first game of football was played in 1858 between Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar at what is now the parklands surrounding the MCG.<sup>66</sup> In 1858 Melbourne became the first official Australian Rules Football team and by the 1870's were attracting as many as 10,000 spectators to matches they played against other suburban clubs such as Carlton.<sup>67</sup> In 1877 the Australian Football Association was formed, with the game's popularity growing, showing a unique ability to generate crowds among all ages and genders.<sup>68</sup> In 1886, Geelong and South Melbourne were able to generate 34,000 to a game at Albert Park Lake. After the winter of 1896, eight teams – Collingwood, South Melbourne, Essendon, Fitzroy, Melbourne, Geelong, St Kilda and Carlton – broke away from the amateur competition and formed the Victorian Football League, taking with them a huge following that ensured the game continued to grow and flourish within Victoria.<sup>69</sup> The very fact that eight Melbourne teams broke away from the amateur competition to form a professional league suggests that money has always been a part of the game and furthermore, that it has always played a significant part in the structure and formula of the game.

As Geoff Slattery noted in *'The Australian Game of Football'*:

The major reason (for clubs breaking away from the VFA to form the VFL) could be summed up in one word: money. The powerful clubs – with central grounds and crowd pulling ability – wielded enormous power and a cycle of dependency had enveloped the wealthier clubs. They commissioned grandstands to improve comfort for their members and borrowed heavily to build them; to service such loans, they needed continuous large cash flow from the gate; to ensure that paying

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<sup>66</sup> AFL, 'AFL History,' [www.afl.com.au/AFLHQ/History/tabid/967/Default.aspx](http://www.afl.com.au/AFLHQ/History/tabid/967/Default.aspx), online, 27 April 2008.

<sup>67</sup> T Grant, *A Nation Stirs*, in *Our Game: 150 years of Footy*, *Herald Sun*, May 5 2008, p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> G Blainey, *A game of our own: the origins of Australian football*, Information Australia, 1990, p 63.

<sup>69</sup> AFL, *AFL History*, 2008.

crowds kept coming, they had to have a well performed team on the field; to ensure that they kept winning, they had to pay players...and so it went.<sup>70</sup>

In 1908 the Richmond Football Club was introduced into the VFL along with University (who lasted only until 1914) and in 1925 the competition was expanded to a twelve team competition with the introduction of North Melbourne, Hawthorn and Footscray.<sup>71</sup>

The twelve team competition that made up the Victorian Football League was one that included business orientation and an emphasis on economic capital – even in the early years of competition. Players were paid money to play the game and supporters paid money to the clubs to attend matches. Furthermore economic capital was considered a necessity to maintain and even upgrade each club's training facilities and grounds on which they played. Each club often relied upon, and received, very generous donations from wealthy businessmen of their community who supported the club for such activities. Indeed, in order to recruit prospective players to their club, administrators would have to raise the necessary funds to lure any player to play with their VFL team. Throughout the 1940's and 1950's the Collingwood football club received many 'generous' donations from tote operator and sports entrepreneur John West. West was a member of the Collingwood community and often donated money to players and to the club for recruitment purposes and in updating and maintaining club facilities. Likewise the Melbourne Football Club was an offshoot of the Melbourne Cricket Club and as a result benefited from the financial wealth of the MCC, establishing themselves as one of the most powerful clubs in the early years of the competition.

The structure of each club's hierarchy of administrators also reflected that of small business. Commonly, each club was governed by the rules and policy formulated by

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<sup>70</sup> G Slattery, *The Australian game of football: since 1858*, Geoff Slattery Publishing, Docklands, 2008 p. 56.

<sup>71</sup> AFL, *AFL History*, 2008.

board members who, in general, were ex players and small businessmen of the community.

However, while it has been acknowledged that business characteristics within the game are almost as old as the game itself, the emphasis on the need for money was miniscule when compared to the commercialism in the game today. In the early twentieth century players were not paid enough money to live – it was more like a paid hobby. In the 1940's the maximum player payment was fixed around the 4 to 5 pound mark, which equated to about two thirds of the basic wage in the wider community.<sup>72</sup> All players who played the game – even at the elite level – only did so as a recreational, weekend activity and in order to survive and support their family, all players had employment outside of football during the week. This is something that was maintained until as late as the 1990's. The reason for this is fundamental in explaining why money and business were not the dominant forces of the game at this time in history – the money was not as prominent. The media coverage, advertising and commercial sponsorship that highlight today's competition were almost non existent because the VFL, in its original form, was not considered a brand or commodity, nor was it marketed, packaged and sold to consumers. Put simply, the money generated through football was not the result of 'selling the game as a brand' but rather through community support. The VFL was considered a game and an expression of the people that grew from, and therefore represented, the citizens of a community and any money that was generated through the game did not have the influence and impact on the game that it does today. Therefore, while economic capital is increasingly the dominating feature of the AFL today, there was a time when the community of the club was considered the driving force of the clubs, the competition and the league's progress.

The twelve suburban clubs brought with them a sense of 'tribalism' and 'community' with the loyalty that supporters formed for their clubs entrenched through generations of family support based on bonds and attachments with their community. The make up of

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<sup>72</sup> B Stewart and B Dickson, *Crossing the Barassi Line: The rise and rise of Australian Football*, in B Stewart (ed), *The Games are not the Same: The Political Economy of Football in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2007, p 76.

any one of these football clubs – from the coaches, players and administrators to the supporters in the outer – reflected the community that they represented and they were able to relate to the grass roots from which their club spawned. The teams played and trained in their community on their own suburban grounds and formed strong attachments to their ground and their supporters. As Trevor Grant notes in his article ‘*Battle Grounds:*’

They were places of secular worship where people gathered with other rabid devotees to spurn timid opposition on Saturdays and socialise during the week. For some, it was the place where their ashes would be scattered.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, the clubrooms of the football teams were often considered the centrepiece of the social setting within the community where players gathered with supporters, administrators, coaches, umpires and other members of the football community to discuss the game and events within the community. Therefore, the game’s emphasis was not simply money; it was the community of the club and other ‘folk culture’ characteristics that highlighted the game’s existence and the supporters’ connection to the game and their clubs. Many supporters were actively involved in the club and most felt distinct ownership of the club. It was their club and their game.

However, as will be further discussed in the following chapters, 150 years after the first game of Australian Rules football was played in the parklands surrounding the MCG, the game has expanded and grown into a business.<sup>74</sup> With South Melbourne relocating to Sydney in 1982 and the introduction of the Brisbane Bears (who, after the 1996 season merged with Fitzroy to become the Brisbane Lions) and the West Coast Eagles in 1987, the AFL had entered into new, profitable markets in a bid to attract sponsors and supporters from around the nation. In 1990 the Victorian Football League (VFL) was

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<sup>73</sup> T Grant, *Battle Grounds*, in *Our Game: 150 years of footy*, in the Herald Sun, 5 May 2008, p. 20.

<sup>74</sup> AFL, *AFL Explained*, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), 27 April 2007.

renamed the Australian Football League (AFL) and its national reach was further boosted with the introduction of the Adelaide Crows (1991), the Fremantle Dockers (1995) and the Port Adelaide Power (1997).<sup>75</sup>

Not only am I attempting to understand the commercial boom in Australia over the last couple of decades, but also how and why it extended to Australian football. What is obvious is that over the last couple of decades, AFL football grounds have become littered with advertising. So too have the fences, the players' jumpers, the coaches' uniforms and even the ball. This has been simultaneous with the continued commodification of society, where everything appears to be a commodity – marketed, branded, advertised and sold. And, likewise, all items of popular culture seemingly became a tool for advertisers to advertise through and thus the power of the media grew.

Tom O'Regan, in his chapter called '*the rise and fall of entrepreneurial television,*' puts much of this down to the deregulation of the financial sector in the 1980's in line with the neo liberal and economic rationalist policies that were beginning to dominate the political and economic landscape. He writes that in the 1980's the deregulation of the finance sector, which saw foreign financial institutions able to enter the domestic market, and the government lifting regulation on interest rates, resulted in a dramatic increase in competition within financial institutions, which ultimately led to an entrepreneurial boom that most definitely included the media.<sup>76</sup>

Banks became eager to lend to customers at attractive rates in order to attract more customers than their competitors. Local banks, fearing competition from each other and foreign banks, began competing for the market share, forgetting for a time all the rules about prudent lending. They actually sought potential debtors, bidding against each other for the rights to service bigger and bigger debts of increasingly indebted clients.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> AFL, *AFL History*, 2008.

<sup>76</sup> T O'Regan, *Australian Television Culture*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1993, p. 40-59.

<sup>77</sup> T O'Regan, p. 40-59.

So, banks were willing to lend copious amounts to entrepreneurs who in turn were attempting to sell their goods or services using the media advertising industry. This led to a distinct rise in the business of creating images and creating brands – what Adorno and Horkheimer label ‘false needs’ – through advertising, in order to attract consumers to their products and therefore make the necessary profit to repay their substantial debts. Furthermore, I believe that it may also have stimulated a mentality within society that money could be made from anything that could be packaged, commodified and sold – including sport.

It seems that government neo liberal policies of the 1980’s, such as the deregulation of the financial sector and privatisation within other sectors, led to an entrepreneurial boom which, in turn triggered an increase in competition within the market and therefore stimulated the very need for advertising and ‘image creation’ to sell. This was done through using the media and other forms of culture, such as sport, as a vehicle to sell consumer products. This served to give the media an almighty increase in power as many companies were willing to pay millions of dollars to advertise on television and other forms of media that could reach the masses and, the more viewers were watching, the more they were willing to pay. Thus the search was on for high rating television ‘programs’ that would attract advertisers. Sport has proven to be a ratings winner that has been both beneficial to the media and advertisers alike. This unique relationship will be discussed further a little later in the thesis.

However, not only has the media industry been affected by the neo liberal policies that have dominated Australian politics since the early eighties – the sporting industry has also been altered and the AFL can be used as a classic case study of this. The AFL is now part of an industry – in fact it is defined as an industry on the official web site of the AFL and contributes in excess of \$1 billion to the Australian government annually.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> AFL, *AFL Explained*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), 27 April 2007.

In their book *'Sport Business in the Global Marketplace,'* Westerbeek and Smith argue that with the AFL's expansion from the VFL to the AFL and the decision to extend the competition to 16 teams, the AFL commission was consciously implementing neo liberal policy. Their claim that their decision to introduce new teams into previously untapped markets (Perth, Adelaide, Sydney and Brisbane) ensured that their brand grew around the nation and allowed for corporations and sponsors from the various previously untapped markets to reach the entire AFL market which now spreads the breadth of the nation.<sup>79</sup> This year, the AFL has expressed its desire to expand its brand further by developing an AFL team on the Gold Coast by the year 2011 and in West Sydney some time after that, which will provide the AFL with the opportunity to enter into new commercial and financial markets in search of corporate sponsorship and consumer markets.

Football writer Martin Flanagan agrees with Westerbeek and Smith. In an interview conducted with him about the state of the game he explained that

The best discussion on economic rationalism in the 1980's was about the Fitzroy Football Club. Fitzroy merged with the Brisbane Bears following the end of the 1996 season. No amount of passion or supporter backlash could stop the merger – it was a matter of finance and economic decision-making. Fitzroy could not stand alone, because they simply could not afford to do so. So, the club made what they believed to be the only economically rational decision – they merged.<sup>80</sup>

Before outlining how the AFL can be further viewed as a business and how this is different to the early years of Australian Football when folk culture preceded business and money, it is important to first understand how sport has developed from the grass roots element of being a game and leisure time pursuit into something that was organised and controlled. This will help in understanding the structure of Australian Football in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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<sup>79</sup> Westerbeek and Smith, 2003, pp 89-127

<sup>80</sup> M Flanagan, *Interview*, 12/3/2006

In his book *'Sport, Culture and the Media,'* David Rowe offers an explanation of how and when games became organised and controlled. Rowe argues that sport's development is a result of changes that have restructured the lives of the world's inhabitants – that is, the rise of capitalism and industrialism and the advent of mass consumption and the commodification of leisure time.<sup>81</sup> While games and physical play have been a part of society since the beginning of man-kind, the notion of sport as we know it today is a far more recent phenomenon. Sport, as a recognisable and structured organisation, is not universal, but in fact emerged in a particular location (Britain) at a particular time (early industrialisation).

Throughout the history of industrialisation, games including physical violence and general rough play were considered too unstructured in both rules and time and often caused serious injury and even death. Likewise, more structured and organised events such as boxing, horseracing and cock fighting often incurred the wrath of moral authorities who believed that these events were accompanied by unacceptable behaviour such as drunkenness and violence.<sup>82</sup>

Ruling elites became concerned with this behaviour and were of the opinion that 'able bodied men' during their time of leisure should compete in purposeful sports. Therefore a more conscious effort was made to structure and organise such sporting events. From the late eighteenth century onwards, the capitalist, urban, industrial and political revolutions began to unfold (with the spread of factory labour) with the circulation of popular, revolutionary and democratic ideas, as well as the beginnings of more radical political movements. This made control and surveillance of popular amusement more difficult. Thus a 'moral panic' emerged concerning the leisure time activities of the working class and as a result, pressure built up for greater control over working class activities (such as sport). Workers were expected to arrive for their working day fit, healthy and ready for

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<sup>81</sup> D Rowe, *Understanding Sport and Media: A Socio-Historical Approach*, in *Sport, Culture and the Media*, Open University Press, Berkshire, 2004, p.11-36.

<sup>82</sup> D Rowe, p. 11-36.

demanding, arduous and sometimes dangerous shifts – all in the name of efficiency and productivity. As a result some sporting events were banned. However, at the same time, there was a movement to promote healthy physical activity and to remove unhealthy urges among working citizens. It was believed that if a nation's citizens were healthy, then they were more likely to be more efficient and productive in the work place.<sup>83</sup>

This was the beginnings of organised sport. It can be argued that it was implemented as a form of escapism for the worker as well as an attempt by capitalist owners to mould the proletariat into moral and ethical characters and to ensure that they were fit and healthy enough to be as efficient within the work place as their employers demanded.

Capital and profit also played a large role in the emergence of organised sport. For the emergent entrepreneurial capitalist class who accumulated wealth by making and selling goods and services, and for the working class who had no means of support other than their own labour power, the idea of professionalising sport and 'playing for pay' held great attraction. Thus, pure amateurism in sport quickly died and from there, entrepreneurs, capitalists and workers alike all meshed to transform sport into a money making business, where profits and income could be generated by all involved in the sport – from promoters to administrators to coaches and players.<sup>84</sup>

However, while money has always been a contributing factor in the structure and development of organised sport, until the point in history when the media's involvement in the game grew to the point where it redefined the 'game' as an item of the 'entertainment industry,' it was preceded by predominantly 'folk culture' elements such as community and tradition. It did not function as a business but rather as an item of culture and while money was a contributing factor in the organised functioning of a football club, it was not the driving factor. This is fundamentally different today. Australian football is now an industry and an item of commodified entertainment.

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<sup>83</sup> D Rowe, p. 11-36.

<sup>84</sup> D Rowe, p. 11-36.

This is reflected in the AFL today. As mentioned above, the AFL official web site defines the AFL as an industry embedded within the economy with business and money making objectives. It may also be viewed as a 'game', I am not at any stage of this thesis arguing that the AFL has lost all of its characteristics that once defined it as a 'game', but it now appears increasingly difficult to discuss the 'game' without also acknowledging its national and commercial reach.

Therefore, the game today, and indeed the game of the future, appears to be starkly different to the game as it was in the early part of its history. The structure of the competition is increasingly dictated by the need and drive for economic capital, and less by the community (who are supposedly represented by their club) and, because of such change the community surrounding the game appears under threat. Certainly the role and impact of the media in this cannot be denied. To fully understand the AFL as a commercial commodity and what the impact of this has been for the sport and its supporters, it is necessary to understand the unique and mutually important relationship between the game of AFL football, its community, the media, advertising and sponsorship within the AFL. The following chapter attempts to do just this.

## Chapter Five – The Commercial Media in the AFL: Show Time

*Although you would walk down the main street of Melbourne and people would say ‘G’day’ or you would sign an autograph at the Melbourne show, there wasn’t the spot light on who was laying on the beach, who was up who, who wasn’t paying and who’s earning this amount of money, because the money wasn’t there, the television wasn’t there...There would be a thirty minute replay of the match of the day, now the whole emphasis is the total package. When the siren goes to end the football in round one, the focus then immediately beams down on round two – who’s up who, who’s not paying, who’s done their ankle, who was at a night club – it is the whole gambit. It is a twenty four hour a day, three hundred and sixty five days a year multi million dollar business. No longer is it just something you did on your day off.<sup>85</sup>*

3AW football broadcaster of twenty seven years, Rex Hunt.

*The media’s coverage of the game has changed dramatically. It was a very small coverage that it once had; you could almost predict the stories that were going to be covered from day to day, such as milestone games for the players. Now the reports are about the political side of the game and the incidents that are happening behind the teams. Once upon a time the sports reporter just wrote about the game, whereas now they are being required to find out what is going on around the game.<sup>86</sup>*

Channel Seven commentator, Tim Watson.

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<sup>85</sup> R Hunt, *Interview*, 10 October 2006.

<sup>86</sup> T Watson, *Interview*, 15 September 2006.

While it once appeared that the people of the community and the supporters of the game owned Australian football, increasingly it appears that the media is now the biggest stakeholder in the game and because of its importance to the game and power within it, it has turned the game into an item of entertainment and therefore drives the game and its direction based on the combined commercial and entertainment needs of the media and the AFL.

Media and sport have had a long association with each other. However, as is suggested by the quotes from broadcasting experts Tim Watson and Rex Hunt above, the role and impact that the media has had on sport has altered as time has progressed. Today it seems the two items of popular culture are almost inseparable with the media used to generate public support for, and interest in, sporting events and sporting events used by the media to attract large audiences for waiting advertisers. In today's age of entertainment and commercialism, the media has transformed the AFL into an item of entertainment – a part of the entertainment industry used to generate massive audiences for television networks for advertisers to reach. It is a mutually beneficial relationship, with money at its core.

However, this has not always been the case. The interest that both parties have previously shared for the other had been modest to say the least, until the entertainment and information age of the last two decades. Certainly in the VFL/AFL this cannot be any better demonstrated than by simply analysing the television broadcasting rights since the 1970's until today. In 1976, Channel *Seven* purchased the right to exclusively broadcast AFL matches for just \$3 million dollars a year. In 1976 the broadcast of the VFL by channel Seven consisted of a highlights and replay package of the weekend's matches on Saturday evenings. The VFL grand final was also shown live. A decade later, in 1987, Christopher Skase, the then owner of Channel Seven paid \$6 million dollars for the right to broadcast the VFL. It is believed that Skase could have purchased the broadcasting rights for as little as \$3 million, however, due to the financial

predicament that faced the VFL in the late eighties, he agreed to double the price to support the VFL and its ailing clubs – in particular, Fitzroy and Footscray.<sup>87</sup>

Unbelievably, the last AFL television broadcasting rights negotiations have seen new, record ground broken, which is significant in indicating precisely how far the AFL's relationship with the media has grown over the last two decades. At the beginning of 2007, Channel *Seven*, together with Channel *Ten* bought the rights to exclusively broadcast the AFL season for the next five seasons for a total of \$780 million. This figure is staggering for the mere fact that just twenty years ago the same rights were purchased for just \$6 million (which, when adjusted for inflation, was the equivalent of \$11,107,646.18 in 2006) at what may have been an inflated price.<sup>88</sup>

While this gives an immediate indication of the recent growth in television's growth in AFL football, the media's relationship with sport began with the print media and has grown throughout the ages of radio, television and new media.

#### THE HISTORY OF THE MEDIA IN AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL - PRINT, RADIO, TELEVISION AND NEW MEDIA:

The role and impact that the media has had in the AFL, and, indeed the role and impact that the AFL has had in the media, has changed dramatically throughout the history of the game. Traditionally the media has played a far more conservative and moderate role in the broadcasting of sport. According to Stoddart in his book '*Saturday Afternoon Fever: Sport in the Australian Culture*', until recently the media have consistently served the dominant cultural view concerning the social purpose of sport in its Australian setting. It can be said with some certainty that this was the case in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when it was the print media that reported on the weekend matches. Many of the journalists were private school members of the socio economic 'middle

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<sup>87</sup> R Fidgeon, *Day One Disaster*, in the *Herald Sun: Guide*, 26 April 2006, p.8.

<sup>88</sup> Reserve Bank of Australia Online, *Inflation Calculator*, [www.rba.gov.au/calculator/calc.go](http://www.rba.gov.au/calculator/calc.go), 1 September 2007.

class,' and their writings generally reflected the values in games in maintaining traditions, conventions and the status quo.<sup>89</sup> VFL football at this time was considered a leisure time activity, played for fun to fill in time, but not for money or profit and the newspaper reports would reflect this – they were very much summaries of the game and event, with little if any sensationalism involved.

Foreshadowing later developments, newspaper proprietors detected a pattern in recording sports results that is central to the media's increased involvement in sport today. Put simply, they noticed that sport sold. According to Cashmore, the '*Bell's Life*' in London, founded in 1822, found its circulation rising as it included sports results and reports. '*Bell's Life*' had a monopoly of these sports results until 1865 when '*The Sporting Life*' was issued with immediate success and from there spawned many world wide sporting publications as well as more extensive coverage of sport within mainstream newspapers. Newspapers offered the first indication that the media's relationship with sport was a positive one for the media as society's appetite for spectator sport grew and intensified.<sup>90</sup>

The emergence of radio in Australia in the 1920's and its steady increase in popularity and distribution in the 1930's played a significant role in transforming sport from a recreation to an entertainment, further stimulating sports growth in popularity within the community. With the battle for ratings, radio stations quickly realised the value of personalities, both in football and in the radio industry and as a result the coverage of the game became less and less about the game itself and more about the personalities and entertainment.<sup>91</sup> It could be argued that this has never been more evident now with radio stations '*Triple M*', '*3AW*' and '*SEN*' constantly vying for popular football and radio personalities such as leading sports commentators, Garry Lyon and Rex Hunt, to improve their ratings.

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<sup>89</sup> B Stoddard, *Saturday Afternoon Fever: Sport in the Australian Culture*, Angus and Robertson Publishers, London, 1986, p. 84.

<sup>90</sup> E Cashmore, *Making Sense of Sport 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005, p.319.

<sup>91</sup> B Stoddard, p. 91-95

Rex Hunt agrees:

The highlight is this...\$780 million is getting paid over the next five years by television alone, nearly \$9 million will be paid by radio for the next three years – radio used to pay a can of coke and a mars bar, now we are paying serious money, so, we have to get the best possible line up.<sup>92</sup>

It should be noted, however, that at this point in history, sporting organisations such as the VFL felt threatened by any form of live coverage of the game. While they felt comfortable with and even encouraged the press to report on sporting events to raise awareness of and interest in the sport, they worried that live coverage of any sporting event would negatively impact upon the crowds and therefore gate receipts of the event, which at this point of sporting history, were the primary source of revenue generated from any sporting event. This is something that AFL clubs are still concerned about. Ultimately, though, for the radio stations that were covering sport, ratings were rising and advertising revenue flourished, gladdening the hearts of many a radio proprietor. Throughout the 1920's, '30's, '40's and early '50's, sport was proving to be a winner, and more importantly it was selling to advertisers who had a large and ready audience for them to advertise to.

This was further enhanced by television. The introduction of television in Australia in 1956 to coincide with the Melbourne Olympics in many ways shows the significance of sport in Australian culture and the media's long involvement in it. It was a sporting event of the world that brought television to Australia and it was Australia's interest in this sporting event that saw the rise in demand for television sets. As Goldlust writes in his book *'Playing for Keeps: Sport, the Media and Society,'* "The significance of sport for this rate of penetration should not be underestimated."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> R Hunt, *Interview*, 10 October 2006.

<sup>93</sup> J Goldlust, *Playing for Keeps: Sport, the Media and Society*, Longman Cheshire, Pty Ltd, Melbourne, 1987, p. 167.

Television's broadcasting of sport also saw a greater emphasis on creating an audience for advertising and, therefore, advertising revenue that was stimulated by radio in the decades before television's introduction into Australia. This of course, holds the foundations of why the broadcasting rights negotiations have carried such weight and momentum in recent years.

While television had little impact on VFL football in the early history of its broadcast, by 1975 when television began broadcasting VFL football matches in colour, its purpose for broadcasting the game took a commercial shift that has since grown and flourished to the point where today, the commodification of the game and television go hand in hand.

Advertisers began to realise the popularity of the VFL and as a result began to spend millions of dollars in advertising campaigns for television during VFL and then AFL matches. This turned the relationship between the VFL and the media upside down as television networks began attempting to maximise their audience share through VFL football to ultimately maximise advertising revenue. As mentioned above, sport attracted a large and varied audience that in turn could be sold on by television networks to eager and willing advertisers.

The current broadcasting contract for television reflects this. As already stated, the right to broadcast AFL matches for the next five years sold for \$780 million – bought by Channels 'Seven' and 'Ten'. This is made up of \$692.5 million in cash and advertising and promotional time valued at \$87.5 million. The consortium of *Seven* and *Ten* then on-sold four AFL matches per week to pay television sports provider *Foxtel* for over \$60 million for the next five years totalling \$315.5 million over the life of the contract.<sup>94</sup> This means that for the first time in the VFL/AFL's history all eight matches will be shown in their entirety at or near live. Only six years ago it was possible to view only four matches a week in their entirety.

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<sup>94</sup> M Ricketson, 'Best Deal' for Football fans comes under attack, in *The Age*, 9 February 2007, p. 1.

And, it is not only the television networks that have realised the value of broadcasting sport. This year radio stations paid up to \$9 million to broadcast AFL matches into their relevant markets. The deal which saw four broadcasters entitled to cover the AFL matches live in Melbourne was a record for any radio broadcasting rights in the history of radio's association with the game. Perhaps even more interesting is the fact that the AFL this year sold what is known as the 'new media' rights for \$60 million – three times the value of the previous deal. 'Telstra,' which held the rights to the new media coverage of the game, was successful in retaining them for a further five years. This gives 'Telstra' exclusive rights in broadcasting and covering football and football issues through new media forms such as the internet and mobile phones.<sup>95</sup>

The media's interest in AFL has grown massively over the last century, certainly since the introduction of television – but particularly over the last two decades. As mentioned above, all forms of media have been recently willing to purchase the rights to broadcast AFL football for record sums of money. What is also clear so far is that the media's willingness to participate in broadcasting and covering the AFL has intensified and with that the price of the AFL broadcasting rights has been driven upwards. However what is not necessarily clear yet is why the press, radio, television and indeed now the new media are willing to pay such massive amounts of money to involve them in this particular form of popular culture. Why are Channels Seven and Ten willing to pay up to \$780 million dollars to broadcast the AFL for five years when just twenty years ago channel Seven were able to broadcast the game for just \$6 million?

The answer, of course, lies with the unique and mutually beneficial relationship that the media shares with not just the AFL, but all forms of popular sport. It is a relationship that most definitely benefits the media, allowing them to boost their ratings, promote their brand, maximise advertising revenue and create a winning image. But, it is also a relationship that serves to benefit the administration of the AFL and its clubs to the point where the relationship appears to be one where the media needs the AFL and the AFL

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<sup>95</sup> D Barrett, *No Vic Dead Spots*, in the *Herald Sun*, 20 October 2006, p. 105.

needs the media. Both forms appear weaker without the other – indeed I am not sure that the AFL could survive without the media, nor can I in this age imagine the media functioning without any sport in its scheduling.

As suggested above, the very fact that both Channel *Seven* and Channel *Ten* were willing to spend a record amount of money for the rights to broadcast AFL football suggests that the AFL is a prized and highly sought after product for commercial television networks. It also suggests that they expect that future gains from broadcasting the AFL will outweigh the massive expense of \$780 million that it has initially cost them.

Commercial television networks want a return on their investment – whatever their investment may be – and AFL football can provide for this. AFL football is one of the most popular sports in Australia – certainly in the southern states of Australia it is the most highly participated in and watched sport in the winter months with a total of 581,839 participants in Australia in 2006.<sup>96</sup> As a result, it provides ready made, large audiences for advertisers who are willing to spend large sums of money to advertise during televised football matches. The higher the ratings of any one particular television program or event for a television network, the higher premiums they can charge to advertisers who wish to advertise during the program. Ultimately it leads to higher advertising revenue, which is essential for television broadcasters attaining a profitable return on their investment.

And, importantly, the AFL provides its broadcasters with generally high ratings, and therefore high levels of advertising revenue. The '*Toyota*' AFL grand final was the most watched television program of any type in Australia in the year 2007 with an average audience of 2.572 million viewers. Outside of the finals series matches, the most watched football matches of the year generated audiences of 1.57 million viewers (Essendon Vs Collingwood) and 1.3 million viewers (Sydney Vs Collingwood).

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<sup>96</sup> AFL, *AFL Annual Report*, AFL online, [www.afl.com.au/season2007/news/newsarticle/tabid/208/default.aspx?newsId=40053](http://www.afl.com.au/season2007/news/newsarticle/tabid/208/default.aspx?newsId=40053), 23 July 2007.

Importantly, the popularity of football is not restricted to just the Melbourne market, but also that of Sydney, Adelaide and Perth, where television audience of AFL matches have increased by 14.4%, 4.6% and 6.4% respectively. In all, since the year 2002, TV audiences of AFL matches have increased by 11%.<sup>97</sup>

This ultimately means higher ratings and therefore higher advertising revenue for the commercial networks broadcasting the game. For example, a thirty second spot on Channel Ten in Melbourne during the Grand Final in 2006 cost advertisers \$55,000. A national thirty second advertisement during the Grand Final cost \$97,000.<sup>98</sup> Large audience figures offer high advertising premiums and revenues for the networks and the AFL provides the networks with this. In total, Channel Seven held 35.89% or \$672 million of the \$1.87 billion TV advertisement market for the six months to the end of 2006. Channel Nine trailed with 33.8% equal to \$682.7 million.<sup>99</sup> So, as can be seen, advertising revenue offers a very important part of a station's revenues, and for Channels Seven and Ten, broadcasting AFL matches allows them to maximise their advertising revenue.

As Ellis Cashmore writes in his book *'Making sense of Sport,'* "Television offers to deliver to advertisers an audience of several million consumers, many of whom will be influenced enough by the 'commercial images' to spend their money on the advertised product, whether it be soap, cars, financial services, or whatever."<sup>100</sup> And in sport, an audience, much of which is a part of the desired 16-44 year old demographic, is ready and waiting to be reached.

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<sup>97</sup> D McLachlan, *Broadcasting and Commercial Operations Report*, online, [www.afl.com.au/Portals/0/afl\\_hq/annual\\_reports/2007/Broadcasting\\_Commercial.pdf](http://www.afl.com.au/Portals/0/afl_hq/annual_reports/2007/Broadcasting_Commercial.pdf), 22 July 2007.

<sup>98</sup> S Perkin, *It all adds up*, in the *Herald Sun*, 13 September 2006, p. 79.

<sup>99</sup> F Leyden, *Advantage Seven*, in the *Herald Sun*, 11 June 2006 p. 41.

<sup>100</sup> E Cashmore, p.319-346

This, of course, is not unique to Australia and the AFL. In America, 175 million households regularly watch at least some part of the Super Bowl. This allows the television company broadcasting the event to charge about \$1.5 million per 30 second advertising slot, anticipating 56 units that yield a total of \$84 million, a figure reduced to \$74 million after advertising agency commissions.<sup>101</sup>

Of course direct advertising revenue is not the only benefit the broadcasting networks receive from broadcasting sport. Another advantage of broadcasting sport, such as the AFL, to a large and varied audience, is that the networks can advertise and sell their own product throughout the coverage of the football match. For example, throughout a Friday night match shown on Prime Time television, Channel Seven can advertise all of their other programs such as '*Desperate Housewives*', '*Ugly Betty*', '*Brothers and Sisters*', '*Lost*', '*24*', '*Packed to the Rafters*,' '*All Saints*' and all of their news and current affairs services that can also attract viewers for ratings and advertising revenue. This was used very effectively by Channel *Seven* throughout their *Australian Open* tennis coverage and they now have the opportunity to use this form of advertising throughout their coverage of the AFL.

Also, the image of the network can be viewed favourably by the general public if they are the official broadcasters of a popular sport. Because the AFL is popular and played and watched by many, Channels *Seven* and *Ten* and even *Foxtel* can gain popularity by association.

However, the relationship between the AFL and the media is not all a one way street with the media constantly on the take. Certainly it can be said that the relationship between the two items of popular culture is one that is mutually beneficial for both parties. Put simply, the AFL, its clubs and its players are all in some way reliant on the media and the money generated through the media for survival. Of the total distributions made by the AFL, 72% totals the amount that the AFL pays to the clubs, who can then spend the

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<sup>101</sup> E Cashmore, p. 319-346.

money as they wish. A very large slice of this 72% comes from the revenues generated from the media broadcasting rights agreement; therefore, the clubs are reliant on the media for many millions of dollars that are distributed to them via the AFL.<sup>102</sup> The sixteen clubs of the AFL are demanding \$2 million a year each from the AFL for the next five years, which totals \$160 million. This would not be possible without the media and their willingness to pay \$780 million to broadcast the game.<sup>103</sup>

Yet the benefits that the game of AFL football receives from the media are not limited to the money it receives directly from the broadcasting rights agreement. Increased media coverage and attention of the AFL has proven to increase the amount of awareness of and interest in the game. The flow on effects of this are that more people are not only watching the game but also attending the games live. This, of course means that gate receipts have increased for clubs, merchandise sales have increased and membership figures for the clubs are also often reliant on media exposure.

Certainly the late chairman of the AFL, Ron Evans, agreed stating in his 2005 annual report that Prime Time television exposure was the most important aspect in promotion and expansion of the AFL and team brand. The more people that see the AFL brand through the media, the more people that are likely to not only watch the game live and take an active involvement in supporting the game, but also watch the matches on television.<sup>104</sup> As Goldlust writes, “the difference between a ‘major’ sport and a ‘minor’ sport is simply that minor sport is not on television much.”<sup>105</sup> And therefore it has not the exposure, the television rights revenue or the sponsorship interest necessary to be a ‘major’ sport. Thanks to the media, that AFL is indeed a major sport in Australia.

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<sup>102</sup> I Anderson, *Record Operating Surplus*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), 22 July 2007

<sup>103</sup> I Anderson, online, 2007

<sup>104</sup> R Evans, *An Extraordinary Journey*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), 2 April 2005.

<sup>105</sup> J Goldlust, p. 146.

So, it can be seen from the above that the relationship between the AFL and the media is one that has and continues to serve both the AFL clubs and the media well. However, it does carry with it another dimension that impacts upon both the game as a whole and indeed the survival and financial well being of the AFL's clubs, and is central to the television coverage of the media – sponsorship. Sponsorship within the AFL has grown since the media's role and coverage in the game has grown and has developed into a vital element for club revenue and survival.

Certainly, in the modern age of commercialism, commodification, branding and marketing, sponsorship has become yet another avenue for businesses to advertise through the game of AFL football and for the AFL to generate revenues from businesses within the market of which they are a part. Now, within any one setting within any one football match at any of the grounds around Australia, advertising of sponsors is littered around the ground on fences, on the ground itself, on footballers' football shorts and jumpers, on the coach's uniforms, on the umpire's uniforms and even on the ball that the players are playing with. Close up camera angles and shots by the broadcasters ensure that sponsor logos are seen clearly and frequently.

And, typically, sponsorship within the AFL is something that has not only evolved with the advent of the media, but also with the business incentives that have influenced the game since the professionalisation of the sport. According to Sleight in his book *'Sponsorship: What it is and how to use it,'* sponsorship is "a business relationship between a provider of funds, recourses or services and an individual, event or organisation which offers in return some rights and association that may be used for commercial advantage."<sup>106</sup>

Note that this is a commercial agreement – one designed to be profitable for both the provider and receiver of the funds. Put simply, companies enter into sponsorship relationships with the objective of increasing their bottom line. Commonly, sponsors

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<sup>106</sup> S Sleight, *Sponsorship: What it is and how to use it*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Berkshire, 1989, p.199.

believe that by sponsoring a league, team, event or individual they can increase the awareness of the company and company product while improving or changing their image. It can also open their product to new markets of demographics, attain almost free media exposure, reinforce their product availability and associate themselves with a most popular form of popular culture. For the receiver, it means a reliable income and source of revenue.

It is though, a relationship that is built almost entirely on the coverage of the event by the media. Sleight writes that, “Media coverage is often the most crucial single element within the reasons for a company entering into sponsorship and it is certainly the one into which most effort must be put if you are going to ensure successful and continued results.”<sup>107</sup>

This is indeed true. Sponsors will be less likely to align themselves with something that does not have media exposure. In fact, media exposure is almost the entire point of sponsorship agreements for the sponsor – the more media coverage of the sponsor, the greater the public awareness becomes of the company and their products and therefore the greater possible sales can be generated.

This point is something that affects the AFL and its clubs and can lead to a spiral of inequality. Sponsors are far more likely to sponsor clubs within the AFL that have a lot of television air time – particularly prime time television on free to air television. This, of course, gives the sponsors much more exposure than if the team that they sponsored were playing on pay television on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon. Certainly clubs such as Collingwood, Essendon, St Kilda and Sydney have little if any trouble negotiating sponsorship deals with companies; however other sides such as North Melbourne continually battle because they have few Prime Time matches on free to air television.

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<sup>107</sup> S Sleight, p. 199

While Collingwood had nineteen free to air matches in the 2007 season, the Kangaroos had just ten, while Carlton had just nine, meaning, as Geelong Football Club Chief Executive Officer Brian Cook publicly pointed out, “some clubs, their supporters and sponsors will receive twice as much exposure as some.”<sup>108</sup>

He went on to say:

We believe that there is tremendous inequalities between those that are getting free to air coverage and those that are not...there are huge discrepancies between the top four or five clubs, who will have between 20 and 22 million viewers (a year) and ours, which will get between eight and ten million viewers.<sup>109</sup>

Note the cycle of inequality here. It is because they are strong, profitable and, most importantly, popular clubs that clubs such as Collingwood and Essendon receive a high proportion of free to air matches. Channels *Seven* and *Ten* want to broadcast to a high number of viewers, and, Collingwood and Essendon can provide this. Getting more free to air matches in prime time only serves to make them stronger, while the weaker clubs with less members and supporters miss out – ultimately making it more difficult for them to become stronger and attract more supporters and sponsors. Certainly clubs often plea for more free to air, prime time matches to increase the awareness of their club, their brand and their sponsors. In doing so they believe that membership, general support and sponsorship will increase. It is no coincidence that the more televised clubs such as Collingwood and Essendon have over 40,000 members, while other clubs that receive less air time such as the Western Bulldogs and Melbourne have a little over 20,000 members. It is also not a coincidence that of all the Victorian based teams, Collingwood average the highest crowds in season 2007 with an average crowd figure of 54,898, while Essendon was second with an average of 42,294.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> J Ralph and G McFarlane, *Pies fans win big in TV deal*, in the *Herald Sun Sport*, 11 February 2007, p.46.

<sup>109</sup> Cited in J Ralph and G McFarlane, p. 46.

<sup>110</sup> G McGlaughlan,, online, 2007

This cycle is hegemonic as society's elite remain at the top of the social hierarchy because of the dominant ideals that appear as common sense – in this case it is making money in the commercial and commodified world of today. Because it appears that making money is the norm within almost any field of society it is generally accepted that the already existing market power and dominance by the larger and more financially secure teams can be and will be used by other commercial interests such as the media to profit, which, of course, leads to the further dominance of the richer clubs and serves to reinforce the existing status quo within society.

The importance of sponsorship within the AFL should not be in any way underestimated. The move by the South Melbourne Football Club to Sydney was very much a decision based on economic and commercial reasons rather than one made on the passion and emotion of the club supporters. South Melbourne simply could not survive in the VFL saturated market of Melbourne. They failed to attract supporters and sponsors and as a result relocated to Sydney, which offered them a whole new market to attract sponsorship and television exposure that all but guaranteed it. When the Swans moved to Sydney many of their home games were broadcast live into Melbourne on Sunday afternoons. It was the first time that the VFL was broadcast on a consistent basis into Melbourne on Sundays. As a result, Sydney had little trouble attracting sponsors in the Sydney market who could receive 'free air time' with the Swans on television on Sunday afternoons. It also meant that their logo would be broadcast into a whole new market – Sydney.<sup>111</sup> Sydney's high number of televised matches on free to air television and the fact that they represent a market that is considered the business hub of Australia means that they are now one of the most highly sort after teams by sponsors to associate themselves with.

Fundamentally it is the media that ultimately decides the success of a sponsorship deal through its coverage and the exposure that it gives the relevant sponsors. Therefore, the

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<sup>111</sup> J Goldlust, p. 169

importance of ratings figures are not only just relevant for the television and radio networks, but also to the sponsors who align themselves with the sporting event or the teams that are competing within the event. And as a result, the television broadcasting of sport has changed into something that now almost mirrors the entertainment industry in its attempt to attract as many viewers as possible to the sports broadcast – not simply lovers of sport. Television now offers the viewer with the broadcast of the game as well as magazine type programs of the sport, news coverage, sports entertainment programs and many other facets within the coverage of the sport that is merely entertainment, designed to attract a wide and varied audience that offers advertisers and sponsors with a larger and more varied audience that they can advertise to.

The AFL's audience has become wider and more varied as the media's role and impact within the game has increased. The game's audience was once generally considered to be dominated by adult males; however, as the media has evolved the game into a form of entertainment, more and more people – men, women and children – have become interested in the game, or at the very least the entertainment programs that have been produced as an extension of the game. This, of course, provides advertisers with larger and more varied audiences not only on game day, but also throughout entertainment and information programs such as *'The Footy Show,' 'The Sunday Footy Show,' 'Before the Game'* and *'Football Classified.'* Ultimately, the AFL's transformation by the media into a form of entertainment has served to enable advertisers to reach a wider demographic, making popular sport an even more valuable asset to television networks.

Interestingly though, it is not just the entertainment programs that have evolved within the AFL entertainment industry. The actual broadcast of the matches have also changed and taken on different entertainment facets that have been aimed at attracting an audience wider than just the sporting purists. As Ellis Cashmore discusses, the broadcast has become a show.<sup>112</sup> John Goldlust writes that this change in sports broadcasting was the evolution of 'play' to 'display', where producers moved to develop an entertainment

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<sup>112</sup> E Cashmore, p. 319-345

package that accompanied all forms of television broadcasting to attract as many viewers as possible.

As a result, to ensure that the match day broadcast was as popular and as entertaining as possible, many facets of the broadcast have been incorporated into the entertainment package including pre-taped interviews, background material, viewer competitions, graphics, symbols and statistics, slow motion replays which emphasise and highlight the spectacular, close up camera shots of both the players and crowd, which may include celebrities or relations of the players, interviews with players and coaches and audio sound tracks and music – all designed to make the broadcast of the match more entertaining and more appealing to as many people as possible.<sup>113</sup> Television networks are attempting to make the game as sellable as possible.

One of the interesting consequences of this has been the changing role of the commentator in the broadcast. It seems that while once they were able to speak openly and honestly about the game, the increased emphasis on high ratings and entertaining the viewers and listeners has seen the responsibilities of the commentator altered to the point where there now appears to be pressure on them to promote the game while broadcasting it. In the 2006 season certain clubs, along with the AFL, stated that they were not happy with certain commentator's 'negative' comments that were perceived by the AFL as 'trashing the brand'.<sup>114</sup> In particular, the Sydney Swans had complained that Channel Ten's Tim Lane and Malcolm Blight had become too negative about the Swans' tactics.

This issue is very much about how the game has been transformed from a game into a brand and the consequences that come with it – in this case the honesty and integrity of the commentator. If the game was without monetary aspects and without multi-million dollar commercial partnerships between the AFL and commercial television networks, then it would not matter what the commentator said about the game.

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<sup>113</sup> J Goldlust, chapter 4

<sup>114</sup> C Wilson, *Fair Call? No way say clubs' chief executives*, in *The Age Online*, [www.theage.com.au](http://www.theage.com.au), 11 August 2006.

AFL executive in charge of NSW, Dale Holmes, suggested as much when he announced, “We take our game seriously and so we want informed commentary, but we also want to entertain as well.”<sup>115</sup>

As well as this, television and radio commentators also believe that they have an obligation to entertain. Tim Watson, who is a commentator for commercial network Channel *Seven* stated,

There is a fine line here, when you are employed you are employed by a radio broadcaster or a television network, so your responsibility is to your employer and therefore you have to keep people there listening to the radio or you have got to keep them there watching the television...it is an entertainment, as a commentator your responsibility is to provide entertainment.<sup>116</sup>

And ‘3AW’ radio commentator of twenty seven years, Rex Hunt, also accepts that AFL broadcasters have a responsibility to entertain on behalf of their employer for ratings.

It is an entertainment industry and when I am getting paid a serious amount of money to put the game into the houses of the people, I have a responsibility to entertain, because we are a commercial network...and because we are a commercial network and we live or die by the ratings, we have to be entertaining to make sure people listen to us.<sup>117</sup>

Therefore, there is little doubt that the commentator does have at least some obligation to be entertaining and to promote the game. In fact, it appears that their role has changed

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<sup>115</sup> C Wilson, *Roos Fuming at Ten’s commentary*, in *The Age Online*, [www.theage.com.au](http://www.theage.com.au), 15 August 2006.

<sup>116</sup> T Watson, *Interview*, 15 September 2006.

<sup>117</sup> R Hunt, *Interview*, 10 October 2006.

from being an informer of the game to an entertainer and promoter of the game.<sup>118</sup> This is a direct consequence of the game becoming an entertainment and a money making commodity, where selling it to the masses in this case appears more important than telling the truth.

Yet this is something that Rex Hunt will not adhere to. “The AFL is a good example of saying that the game is great when it is crap...during the year it was deemed that I was trashing the brand, but I am paid to give an opinion and I won’t be bought by anyone.”<sup>119</sup>

Nevertheless, it does appear that the role of the commentator within commercial networks has taken on a greater commercial and promotional emphasis.

However, it should also be noted that the impact of the ‘entertainment age’ in the AFL’s coverage by the media has not been restricted to off the field, but also on the field. The influence of television on the structure of the AFL goes far beyond the relocation of the South Melbourne Football Club to Sydney. It now can be argued that television dictates and certainly directs the very make up of the AFL – from its fixture, to the rules of the game. Certainly it has been acknowledged by Ben Buckley, the former ‘broadcasting, strategy and major projects manager’ of the AFL, that the AFL’s priority for the 2007 fixture was to maximise attendances and television audiences, showing that after pouring millions and millions of dollars into the game, the league’s broadcasters expect a return from their \$780 million investment.<sup>120</sup>

Throughout the history of the game, up until the late eighties and early nineties, all football matches were played on a Saturday afternoon, at or near two o’clock. Commonly the games were played at each team’s traditional suburban home ground,

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<sup>118</sup> K Helland and H Solberg, ‘*Journalism – an instrument to promote TV sports rights?*’, in M Desbordes, (ed), *Marketing and football: an international perspective*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Amsterdam, 2007, pp. 51-82.

<sup>119</sup> R Hunt, *Interview*, 10 October 2006.

<sup>120</sup> B Buckley, online, 2006.

each with an audience of about 20,000. However, television's need to increase ratings, maximise viewers and seek a return on their investment has seen the television networks dominate scheduling of matches over the last decade.

Today, the weekend's football matches are now spread from Friday nights until Sunday evenings for television to ensure as many people are watching the game as possible. Now instead of all games being played on a Saturday afternoon at two o'clock, games are played in Prime Time on Friday night, in Prime Time on Saturday nights and on Sunday, games are now played at 1.10 pm, and 5.10 pm for television purposes. Generally only two games a weekend are played on Saturday afternoons and only two games a weekend now start at the traditional time of two o'clock.

Such is the influence of the television networks that broadcast AFL matches that now almost all finals in the first, second and third week of the final series are played at night to maximise the television audience of the game for the television broadcasters. In the year 2004, Brisbane had to travel to Melbourne and play twenty four hours after their Grand Final opponents Port Adelaide, because the AFL and Channel *Ten* wanted their preliminary final against Geelong to be played during Prime Time on Saturday night, rather than during Saturday afternoon when the television audience would have been substantially smaller.

The reason that this has happened is simple – television. In basic terms it would be financially disadvantageous if all eight games of the weekend were played on the same day at the same time across the country. Ultimately this would mean that the broadcasters could only broadcast one game live each weekend and furthermore they would be broadcasting matches at the same time against each other, competing for advertisers and viewers at a time when relatively very few people are watching. It would also mean that supporters of the game could only attend one game each round.

Peter Di Sisto, writer for '*AFL publishing*', sees the influence of television in the scheduling of matches as inevitable. "You have to allow a little bit of involvement from the networks; you have to allow them to choose the games that they want to cover and to

at least make suggestions on how the game is run. The networks want a return on their investment and therefore they want the best games that attract the best audiences.”<sup>121</sup>

The proposal for a night Grand Final is another example of this. Currently the AFL Grand Final is played on the last Saturday in September at the MCG in the afternoon. However a night Grand Final, played in Prime Time would greatly enhance the potential for a wider and larger audience for the television networks, which would lead to higher ratings and higher advertising revenue. The National Rugby League moved their grand final from Sunday afternoon to Sunday night earlier this decade and in 2006 attracted 2.6 million viewers nationally. Interestingly the AFL Grand Final attracted 3.9 million viewers nationally when played during the afternoon. The Australian Open Men’s tennis final is now played in Prime Time to attract a larger television audience and was, in fact, the highest rating show when it moved it to night time with 4.05 million viewers nationally in 2005. However, such a move has so far been resisted by the AFL who fears that a break from the traditional afternoon timeslot might “migrate against children and older fans.”<sup>122</sup>

The media’s involvement in the actual game though, goes far beyond the weekend scheduling of matches. The very structure of the way in which the game is now played is also littered with television’s influence. Significantly, play cannot be resumed by the umpire after a goal is scored until they see a red light flashing from the television commentary box in the grand stands of the ground. This red light signals that the commercial break is over on television and therefore the umpires are free to recommence play. In this case, television is dictating the very flow of the game.

Perhaps even more significant is the fact that many rules within the game have been altered or introduced with the aim of making the game quicker and therefore more entertaining and interesting to prospective viewers. Rule changes such as the ‘deliberate

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<sup>121</sup> P Di Sisto, *Interview*, 14 March 2006.

<sup>122</sup> C Wilson, *Night Grand Final on Cards as Networks Push*, in *The Age Online*, [www.theage.com.au](http://www.theage.com.au), 1 June 2006.

out of bounds' rule, which states a player may not deliberately take, or dispose of the ball out of bounds, have been implemented to ensure that the play of the game is always moving. The time allowed by a player to have a shot for goal has been reduced to thirty seconds to reduce the amount of delays in a game and now a player is able to kick in from a behind immediately after the point has been scored instead of having to wait for the umpire to wave his flag. This is also designed to speed up play and therefore make the game as interesting and as entertaining as possible.

In the AFL's pre season competition, the 'NAB' cup, a rule was introduced, which stipulated that if a player kicked a goal outside of the fifty metre arc then the team he represented was rewarded with a score of nine points, rather than the traditional six. Again, this was introduced for entertainment purposes.

Furthermore, umpires now wear microphones during the course of play to make the television aspect of the game more entertaining and informative. This has not been implemented for the benefit of the umpires, or the players, but rather the television viewers at home. Former AFL Umpires Association boss Bill Deller has said that he has reservations about the use of microphones on umpires throughout the game, but realises that it is the result of television's influence within the game. "The telecasters are partners in this and their contributions contribute to the game. But we have very serious reservations about the intrusion of the microphones."<sup>123</sup>

Tim Watson says that the changes that have been made to the game for the media have generally been good.

I think most of the changes have been good for the game. Footy is a great television sport and it has been a great partnership between television and football too...we do need to generate money and the best way to do that is through the broadcasting rights, and that distribution goes back to the clubs and keeps them

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<sup>123</sup> Cited in D Barrett, *Umps go cold on live mikes*, in the *Herald Sun*, 10 May 2005, p. 93.

aflot – so there has to be a bit of give and take by the sport so that they can nurture that relationship.<sup>124</sup>

Rex Hunt is not so convinced. “I think that changes should be only made for the betterment of the game, not for the entertainment aspect.”<sup>125</sup>

However, as has been shown above, it is television and its drive to be entertaining that has changed the structure and many rules of the game. Therefore, unlike the game before television, the game today is driven by television and often changed to become more entertaining.

As mentioned above, the latest television broadcasting negotiations saw Channel *Seven* and Channel *Ten* combine to pay \$780 million to the AFL for the right to broadcast AFL matches for five years. However, their decision to then sell four games a weekend to pay television supplier *Foxtel* means that ultimately, *Foxtel* has become the number one broadcaster of the AFL, broadcasting twice as many matches as their free to air partners throughout the home and away season. This carries with it consequences – many of which are negative for the football fan, the football clubs and even the AFL.

The fact that four games of AFL football are played on pay television each weekend means that every football fan has to pay to watch four games of the most popular sport in the country. The positive, of course, is that all eight games are covered in their entirety live or on small delay, however only four games of the eight are accessible to the average football fan who cannot afford the \$634.80 a year to subscribe to *Foxtel*.<sup>126</sup>

This is a twenty percent decrease of games shown on free to air television from the last broadcasting rights negotiations and as a result the game on television appears to be less

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<sup>124</sup> T Watson, *Interview*, 15 September 2006.

<sup>125</sup> R Hunt, *Interview*, 15 September 2006.

<sup>126</sup> M Ricketson, ‘*Best Deal*’ for fans comes under attack, in *The Age*, 9 February 2006, p. 1.

accessible to the grass roots supporters of the game as it alienates those supporters who do not have pay television or simply cannot afford it. This shows that the game has moved away from the grass roots community of supporters and toward the commercial interests of the game.

It is particularly bad for those who barrack for teams such as the Kangaroos who, in 2007, play up to half of their matches on pay television, or Hawthorn, who play a staggering fourteen of their twenty two matches on pay television, or Carlton, who score just nine games on free to air television, while Collingwood play nineteen out of their twenty two home and away matches on free to air television.<sup>127</sup> This means that while the Collingwood supporters have little or no trouble seeing their team play on television each weekend, the Kangaroos supporters need to subscribe to *Foxtel* at the cost of over \$600 per year to see their team play half of their matches.

The flow on effects of this simply seem to exacerbate the inequalities between the clubs in that the Kangaroos may struggle to attract supporters, members and sponsors while on pay television, and those that do already support the Kangaroos, who have not subscribed to *Foxtel*, may lose interest in the game and therefore their team.

According to Peter Di Sisto, “It’s inevitable that there is going to be an element of sport on pay TV – that’s what is happening around the world. It is an international trend and we can’t do anything about it.”<sup>128</sup>

This is but just one of the consequences associated with television’s growing involvement and influence within the game of AFL football. Certainly there is little doubt that the AFL has been transformed from a game into a form of entertainment by the media and is used by media networks to generate audiences for advertisers and to generate advertising revenue. Indeed many changes that have taken place within the competition have been

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<sup>127</sup> J Ralph, and G McFarlane, *Pies win big in TV deal*, in *Herald Sun Sport*, 11 February 2006, p.46.

<sup>128</sup> P Di Sisto, *Interview*, 14 March 2006.

made for television and entertainment purposes and, furthermore, not all stake holders have benefited from such change. Chapter six aims at further exploring the consequences of the game becoming a business in the entertainment industry for the community.

# **Chapter Six – Details of the Commodification of Sport:**

## **Show Me the Money**

The consequences of the media's increased involvement in the AFL is not just something that can be described and explained through a discussion of only the media and the game of AFL football. Such is the power of the media and the impact of AFL football on its players, coaches and supporters within society, the consequences, be they good or bad, have spread far beyond the boundaries of ratings, advertising revenue and rule changes. The impact that the media has had on the game, which has been discussed in the preceding chapters is only the beginning. The flow-on effects of this have been significant to say the least to the point where almost all facets of the game – the players, the colours and design of club jumpers, the names of the clubs, the location of club training facilities and offices, player loyalty and enjoyment and even on field success – are now driven and influenced by money. The commercialism and commodification of the game has affected the micro structure of the AFL.

Overall the increased commercialism within AFL football and the commodification of the game into an item of entertainment within the entertainment industry has led to a decrease in the 'folk culture' element and tradition within football clubs, which has undermined and threatened the genuine community at the expense of economic rational objectives and an ever increasing need for money.

This chapter not only attempts to take an in depth look at these consequences, but also attempts to relate them back to the theory discussed in chapter one, in an attempt to understand the greater significance that the media's role in sport has had on society and how we can attempt to understand what is happening and why.

There is little doubt that one of the primary consequences that the media has brought with it to the game of AFL football is the increased need for money – not only to function within an ever growing industry, but also for mere survival. Certainly chapters three, four and five introduced us to the idea that the AFL is indeed now functioning as a business and sport is now a commodity within the commercialised world, competing for the hearts and minds of Australian consumers and against other forms of popular culture within the entertainment industry. And, as a result, as money has become more significant and a greater priority for clubs within the AFL, increasingly they have been forced to act more and more as a commercial entity, putting money and economic objectives ahead of almost anything else.

Certainly there is a school of thought that says that money and the impact and influence that it has in the game has been the same throughout the history of the VFL and that it is no more or less prevalent today than it was in the first years of the VFL competition. Tim Watson notes that discrepancies between clubs in terms of money and success are not a new phenomenon and were indeed relevant in the VFL before the AFL emerged in 1990.

I think it (money) certainly helps, but if you look back to the VFL when it existed there was a group of teams that dominated. Now there is a group of teams that dominate the AFL and they are not necessarily the Victorian teams. It (success) should be cyclical and about the decisions you make and about talent identification – and that often has more to do with what resources you have available and at the moment the interstate clubs seem to have a distinct advantage in regard to that. But there has always been the poor relations of football...the Bulldogs have only won one premiership, St Kilda has only won one premiership, South Melbourne were a perennial loser, Fitzroy have been a perennial loser...so that in itself is something that has been an historical part of the game.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Watson, T., *Interview*, 15 September, 2006.

However, is this because there have always been historical discrepancies between clubs when it comes to wealth? Essendon and Carlton (until recently) have long been considered Victorian financial heavy weights of the competition and have both won sixteen premierships. Collingwood, another wealthy club has fourteen premierships. And, as Watson says, the poorer clubs have been the perennial losers of the competition. However, it should also be noted that the AFL has incorporated initiatives and policy to ensure that this does not happen and that the set up of the competition stays as 'equalitarian' as possible. One such initiative is the equalisation policy.

The equalisation policy has been fundamental to the AFL strategy since 1985 and as stated on the AFL's official web site, the AFL commission views the equalisation policy as fundamental to the long term health of the AFL competition.<sup>130</sup>

According to the official web site of the AFL, the policy means that the revenue generated by the AFL in such areas of broadcasting, corporate sponsorship, finals income, the pre season competition, corporate hospitality and the AFL record is distributed to all clubs equally. The policy is supported by the national AFL draft (where the sixteenth ranked team at the end of the season has the first draft selection to select the best player in the draft, while the first ranked team has the last selection of the first round of the draft) and the Total Player Payments Cap (which limits the total player payments of each competing club to an equal amount, ensuring that the richer clubs cannot and do not poach the better players from the poorer teams by offering them more money.)

The salary cap figure for the year 2007 was set at \$7.62 million, while the AFL evenly distributed \$91,964,436 to its sixteen competing clubs.<sup>131</sup> It should also be noted that the AFL does give extra money to financially battling clubs – the Western Bulldogs (who received \$9.2 million of AFL distributions in 2007), the Kangaroos (\$9.7 million), Carlton (\$8 million), Richmond (\$7.3 million) and the Melbourne Football club (\$8

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<sup>130</sup> AFL, *A policy of equalization*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), 22 July 2007.

<sup>131</sup> AFL online, 22 July 2007.

million) who are all unable to remain financially viable without the aid and assistance of the AFL. In the year 2006, the AFL also handed out \$5.8 million in financial assistance to six suffering clubs – the Kangaroos, Carlton, the Western Bulldogs, Port Adelaide, Melbourne and St Kilda.<sup>132</sup>

The equalisation policy is designed to ensure the impact of the richer clubs dominating in the AFL is kept at a minimum so that all sixteen clubs, no matter what their off field status in terms of wealth, all have a fair and equal chance at achieving the ultimate in on field success. As the AFL web site stipulates, “The equalisation policy promotes, but does not guarantee, greater financial stability for individual clubs. It also promotes competitiveness and evenness on the field, allowing for uncertainty of outcomes and the opportunity for surprise results.”<sup>133</sup>

So, what has been the result of the equalisation policy? Has it minimised the effect that money has in on field success?

To be fair it appears that in many ways it has. For example, in the year 2007 the financially struggling Kangaroos placed higher on the ladder than the more financially secure Essendon, Collingwood, Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide after the ‘home and away season’ and it was not a non Victorian team that dominated the competition, but rather a team from Victoria – Geelong. In 2008 it was two Victorian based teams – Geelong and Hawthorn – that played off on the last Saturday in September for the premiership, while the last four teams left in the competition competing in the Preliminary Finals a week earlier were also Victorian based teams.

Furthermore, it is possible in today’s competition that any team can beat any other team, regardless of their financial might. This year, North Melbourne, who receive extra financial aid from the AFL to ensure that they remain financially viable, defeated the

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<sup>132</sup> D Barrett, *AFL aware Vics doing it tough*, in the *Herald Sun*, 19 September 2006, p. 82.

<sup>133</sup> AFL, *A policy of equalization*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), 22 July 2007.

financially stronger Collingwood, while the Western Bulldogs, another ‘third world’ team in the competition, defeated ‘first world’ teams Essendon and Collingwood. And, within the last decade, the Kangaroos have won the premiership on two occasions, proving that it is not just money that is needed for on field success.

And it should also be noted that the very nature of the equalisation policy is hardly ‘capitalist’ in its make up. It is a form of government (AFL) intervention to ensure that the competition remains as even as possible – this shies away from characteristics of capitalism and economic rationalism and towards equalitarianism. In short, it is designed to even the competition and remove the influence of money in on field success.

However, try as it might, it still seems to be aimed at enhancing the commercialisation and commodification of the game, and may not have even been all that successful in evening out the competition.

The AFL says that the positive outcomes from the implementation of the equalisation policy are numerous, but they seem more about the growth of the bottom line than anything else. Attendances, club memberships, broadcast audiences, media coverage, sales of licensed products and overall participation rates have all increased since the implementation of the equalisation policy. So, on the one hand it has assured the survival of many clubs in the AFL, but it has also underlined the importance of money as a necessity to survive.

Supporting this is the AFL’s claim on their web site that the equalisation policy promotes an even competition where results of games can be uncertain and surprising and that this very uncertainty and evenness of the competition serves to maximise public interest while also increasing the potential revenue generated by broadcasting rights, membership sales, gate receipts and corporate sponsors.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> *A policy of equalization*, 22 July 2007.

There is little doubt that the equalisation policy does serve to ensure the survival of all sixteen clubs within the AFL competition and it can be viewed as a very equalitarian policy. However, the flow on effects of the equalisation policy can be seen as commercial. To survive and thrive within the entertainment industry the AFL now finds itself in, money is now the most necessary recourse needed for survival, and, a more even and equal competition is a more exciting, entertaining and therefore more marketable brand. This maximises public interest in the sport and therefore also potential revenue. This is fundamentally different to the early years of the VFL when the game was not considered a part of the entertainment industry and money was not considered the most necessary recourse needed for survival.

As well as this, it still seems to me that it is the most financial clubs who generally reign supreme on the field, or more to the point the less financial clubs seem to struggle. It is true that on any one day any one team can beat another – and as the examples above have shown, this can and does happen within the competition often. However, when it comes to premierships, the poorer teams such as the Western Bulldogs and Melbourne have not been successful for over forty years and while Geelong was victorious last year, it has been over forty years since they last won a premiership. The Kangaroos, of course, appear to be the exception, having won two premierships in the 1990's while also battling off the field financially. However, while richer clubs such as Essendon and Collingwood have won sixteen and fourteen premierships respectively, the Kangaroos have won only four. In 2008, Hawthorn won the premiership and then posted a remarkable profit of \$4 million – the most of any team for the year.

As well as the above, the teams placed fourteenth and fifteenth on the ladder in 2007 - Carlton and Melbourne who finished last in 2008) - are also clubs that have received financial aid from the AFL due to their own inability to stand alone as a financial entity. Carlton finished last on the ladder in 2006 – they also finished the season with a \$3.3 million dollar loss from their operations.<sup>135</sup> And, as was shown earlier, while poorer

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<sup>135</sup> J Niall, 2007, p.4

teams do often beat some financial teams on the field, when it come to premierships the non Victorian teams have had a stranglehold on the competition over the last ten years.

So, while the equalisation policy can be viewed as a form of AFL intervention designed to ensure that all sixteen clubs are as even as possible and that it does indeed promote notions of evenness and a 'fair go,' which, if viewed as a symbol for society can be seen as promoting egalitarianism or the welfare state, the point remains that the AFL is now a business and the equalisation policy has been implemented in recognition of this.

Peter Di Sisto agrees:

It (the equalisation policy) has a dual emphasis. It is designed to make all clubs competitive and generally the cycle works, but the bigger issue is that it is a really clever device in that it does work in a business manner as well. It provides a big package that comes together that generates a lot of money. This competition remains competitive so that the interest builds and it is covered ad nauseum."<sup>136</sup>

This entire discussion draws upon Bourdieu's theory that because most, if not all, fields of society have lost their autonomy to the economic field, economic capital is essential to each field in society to ensure success, recognition and power. The clubs with the most economic capital not only have their future assured, but also seem to win more often than their poorer counterparts.

Success depends on money. While we have seen the arguments in opposition to this statement, it must be noted that the traditionally poorer, less financial clubs off the field, have also struggled on the field, particularly over the last twenty years. From 1981 until 2006 only nine clubs won a premiership. That means that nine clubs shared 26 premierships, which also means that seven clubs did not win a premiership at all over this time. More interesting is perhaps an analysis of who has won these premierships and

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<sup>136</sup> P Di Sisto, *Interview*, 14 March 2006.

when. Carlton, who were a financial powerhouse in the eighties, were victorious in 1981, 1982, 1987 and then again in 1995. Hawthorn, another successful club in the eighties both on and off the field won their premierships in 1983, 1986, 1988, 1989 and 1991 and 2008. Essendon, who are one of the most financially successful and secure clubs in today's competition were successful in 1984, 1985, 1993 and 2000, while Collingwood, who are probably the most famous and most financial club in Victoria were premiers in 1990. It should be noted that there is one exception to this theory – North Melbourne. The Kangaroos are one of the less financially successful and profitable clubs in the competition, yet they were successful in both 1996 and 1999.<sup>137</sup>

However, further supporting the theory that financially successful clubs achieve more on the field than their poorer contemporaries is the fact that interstate clubs, who make up many of the league's most profitable organisations, have won ten of the last seventeen premierships. The West Coast Eagles were successful in 1992, 1994 and 2006, the Adelaide Crows went back to back with premierships in 1997 and 1998, Brisbane won the premiership three years in a row from 2001, Port Adelaide were victorious in 2004, while the Sydney Swans beat the West Coast Eagles in the year 2005. More staggering is the fact that prior to last year, when Geelong claimed victory in the Grand Final, there had not been a Victorian club in the Grand Final since 2003, meaning that the more financially successful interstate clubs have competed in three of the last four Grand Finals. Prior to 2008 there had not been two Victorian teams in the Grand Final since 2000, when Essendon defeated Melbourne.<sup>138</sup> This suggests that money buys success.

Furthermore, Melbourne has not won a premiership since 1964, Footscray/Western Bulldogs have not been successful since 1954, St Kilda has not won since 1966 and until 2007 Geelong had not won since 1963. So, does this show that the financially secure clubs interstate and in Victoria have a greater chance of winning premierships? Is money so important within football that it also determines on field performance?

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<sup>137</sup> AFL, *History of the AFL*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), 27 April 2007.

<sup>138</sup> AFL, *History of the AFL*, online, 2007.

“There is certainly enough evidence,” says Peter Di Sisto of *AFL Publishing*, “to suggest that the better organised clubs do better. They have more resources, a greater ability to spend and they are concerned with long term planning.”<sup>139</sup>

Certainly there are statistics that suggest that this is the case. For example, Sydney and West Coast, who both contested the 2005 and 2006 Grand Finals came in second and third when comparing how much each club was able to spend on player payments. The club who spent the most money on their players was Brisbane, who incidentally played in four consecutive Grand Finals, beginning in 2001. In 2006 the West Coast Eagles, who won the premiership, also received more money than any other club in ‘membership’ (\$11.045m) and ‘football revenue’ (\$34.529m), while when it came to ‘total football spending’ West Coast and Sydney came in at third and fourth. Interestingly, West Coast had more assets than any other club in 2006 and recorded a greater profit than any other club in 2006 as well (\$2.2m).<sup>140</sup>

At the other end of the scale, Carlton, who finished last on the ladder in the year 2006, also finished last on the ladder for ‘total revenue made’, second last for ‘assets’, second last for ‘total football expenditure’, last for ‘total football revenue’ and while West Coast topped the ladder for total profit, Carlton came last, recording a loss of \$3.3m.<sup>141</sup> As Carlton’s off field financial problems worsened, so too did their on field results in terms of wins and losses. These statistics would indicate that there is at least some small relationship between off field success (money) an on field success (winning premierships).

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<sup>139</sup> P. Di Sisto, *Interview*, 14 March 2006.

<sup>140</sup> J Niall, *Big-spending Pies top interstate rivals*, in *The Age Sport*, 2 March 2007, p. 2-3.

<sup>141</sup> N Ahmed, *Can money buy a flag?*, in *The Age Sport*, 17 March 2007, p. 1,4.

And, Western Bulldogs President David Smorgan, whose team has not won a premiership since 1954 and was almost forced to merge with Fitzroy in the late eighties claimed as much in an 'Age' article last year.

Just have a look at the clubs that have participated in the grand finals over the last few years, have a look at the amount of spending in the football department. I'm not talking about the marketing or finance department but I'm talking about the football department and the Grand Final winners have been in the top quartile of football department spending.<sup>142</sup>

Certainly when looking at the top four clubs on the ladder for 'total football spending', Brisbane, Collingwood, Sydney and West Coast have all competed in grand finals since the year 2002. In fact between the four of them, at least one of them had been in every grand final from 2001 until 2006.<sup>143</sup>

And while this year saw the top eight with more Victorian teams than non Victorian teams and an 'all Victorian' Grand Final, at the end of the home and away season in 2006, the top four teams on the ladder were non Victorian, wealthy clubs. So, is it mere coincidence that the teams that have won recent premierships are also those clubs who have established themselves off field financially, or is there a genuine relationship between off field performance and on field performance? As already stated, Hawthorn's premiership this year was matched with an equally impressive profit of \$4 million.

It seems from the above examples and analysis that there is a close relationship between money and premierships and it brings with it a cycle. If a team is winning then it is likely that its crowd figures and gate receipts will increase, merchandise sales will also most likely increase, sponsorship will be easier to find and corporate events will appear more attractive. Likewise, if a team has more money off the field then it is likely that they can

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<sup>142</sup> Cited in N Ahmed, 2007, p. 1.

<sup>143</sup> J Niall, 2007, p. 3.

service their players and prepare in a manner that the poorer clubs cannot. Money can be spent on fitness initiatives, better facilities, sports science and training programs which can lead to a better playing performance on the field. Put simply, they can be better prepared and trained because their club has more money, and as they continue to win on the field, they continue to make more money off it.

It should be also noted that the economic climate in which the Victorian teams are a part of is far more competitive and therefore limited than what the non Victorian teams have to endure. Currently in the AFL there are ten Victorian teams, nine of which are located in Melbourne very close together. This means that they have to compete for supporters, sponsorship and the corporate dollar – so those who are winning appear more attractive to sponsors, supporters and corporate businesses than those who are losing. Therefore, there is enormous pressure on all sides to perform on the field so that they can attract the necessary funds needed for survival off the field. Interstate clubs do not have to compete in such a market and as a result supporters, sponsors and the corporate dollar are easier to find. According to David Smorgan, this means that while non Victorian teams have their future secured and can focus entirely on winning premierships; Victorian clubs also have the worry of generating enough funds for survival.

Their focus, from the board all the way through, I would put to you is probably...two thirds football, one third non football. We'd be the other way round, with two thirds non football, one third football.<sup>144</sup>

Is money so influential in the AFL that the financially successful clubs of the competition are also the most successful clubs on the field? Is money a requirement for winning games in competition? Do only the richer, more financially secure clubs win premierships? Certainly from the above evidence it can be argued that 'those who have

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<sup>144</sup> Cited in N Ahmed, 2007, p.1,4.

the most money, win.’ This is an example of how money now can drive one of the most fundamental aspects of the game – on field success.

However, the influence that money has had within the AFL is not limited to on field success. It has gone beyond the boundary line and now affects almost all facets of the game. Indeed there have been many examples of clubs and players within the AFL acting as commodities for financial gain. This was highlighted in 1999 when the then captain of the Geelong Football Club, Gary Hocking, legally changed his name to a brand of pet food to aid his financially stricken club. Hocking changed his name to ‘Whiskas’ by deed poll in a deal reportedly worth \$70,000 for the club, \$20,000 for himself and \$10,000 for a Geelong based animal shelter.<sup>145</sup> As already mentioned, this is an example of what can sometimes be extreme commercialism within the AFL. So important are commercial interests within the AFL and such is the need for money by clubs for survival that drastic measures like this are sometimes taken by clubs and their players.

Hocking was almost literally transformed into a commodity. He was used to sell a product and a brand with the aim of selling and promoting another brand – his football club. The reward, of course, was money.

An extension of this is the example of 1997, when the Carlton Football Club, who traditionally wear a navy blue jumper, changed their jumper to a light powder blue jumper for one match at ‘Optus Oval’ to launch a new, blue ‘M&M’ chocolate. The deal earned the Carlton Football Club \$200,000 and provided ‘M&M’ with national televised advertising exposure.<sup>146</sup> In this example, the traditional navy blue jumper that Carlton had traditionally worn was abandoned for the week for the commercial and monetary gains that could be acquired from promoting ‘Mars Confectionary’ and their new ‘M&M’ product in a football match. Essentially though, it was done for money. This merely underlines the importance of money for AFL clubs in today’s commercial competition.

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<sup>145</sup> Angelfire, *Athlete Changes Name to Cat Food Brand*, online, [www.angelfire.com](http://www.angelfire.com), 13 March 2005.

<sup>146</sup> Lyon, K., *Blues ‘away’ sponsor opens door to ‘away’ strip*, online, [www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/12/15/1071336886968.html](http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/12/15/1071336886968.html), 12 April 2003.

Collingwood negotiated a similar deal with *'Mars Confectionary'* in the year 2000, as did the Kangaroos with *'Orange Communications'* in 2001.<sup>147</sup> This supports Adorno and Horkheimer's theory that commercialism and commodification has had a damaging effect on the originality and authenticity of culture.

The relationship with commercial companies and AFL football is by no means new though. Throughout the years, AFL football grounds slowly but surely incorporated sponsors and 'naming rights' to negotiate monetary deals with commercial companies. Princes Park became known as *'Optus Oval.'* Kardinia Park is now known as *'Skilled Stadium.'* Docklands is now known as the *'Telstra Dome'* and in Adelaide what was once 'Football Park' is now *'AAMI Stadium.'*

The effect of this can also be felt by the fans of the game. As football and football clubs have become increasingly preoccupied with money and their need to continually generate funds to survive, the supporter may feel that they are less and less a part of the football club that they support. Indeed it cannot be denied that football clubs within the AFL have had to expand outside of their original suburban origins for their growth and survival; however, one of the consequences of this is that they appear to less and less represent the community that they once most definitely did.

Traditionally the entire club was made up of members from the community that the club represented. It was likely that all, or most of the players, were from the community or local district, as were the coaches and board members. Perhaps the exception to this idea was the victorious South Melbourne team of 1933 who were dubbed the 'foreign legion' by the press as many of their players were from South Australia and Western Australia. In relative terms and in comparison to their competitors that year, South Melbourne had very few 'local' players representing their team. However, they were the exception to the rule and as a result, because players, coaches and administrators were all generally from

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<sup>147</sup> Afana, *Good Old Collingwood Crispies Forever?*, online, [www.afana.com.afl](http://www.afana.com.afl), 12 March 2006.

the same area, there was a unique sense of belonging that represented the wider community which they were all representing.<sup>148</sup>

This though appears increasingly not to be the case as monetary objectives and needs have in many instances led to the decline of the community in some ways. Certainly while once clubs played at grounds that were in the suburb or area of which they represented, almost all suburban grounds in Victoria (except Geelong) have been abandoned for the state of the art 'Telstra Dome' or the 'MCG.' As well as this, some clubs have even moved their home base outside of the suburb of which they are named.

In the year 2004, Collingwood officially moved their home base to Melbourne's 'Lexus Centre.' This effectively means that now Collingwood do not play in Collingwood, nor is their home base in Collingwood. Therefore the question has to be asked, 'Are they still Collingwood?' Another of these examples lies with the Hawthorn Football Club, who just last year moved their home base from 'Glenferrie Oval' in Hawthorn to 'Waverly Park.' Late in 2006 Hawthorn made a deal with the Tasmanian government to play twenty games in Launceston over five years. The package was reported to be worth \$20 million to the club.<sup>149</sup> This suggests that the only representation of Hawthorn that they really now have is their name and their history.

As Peter Di Sisto notes, "Hawthorn is based in Mulgrave and has a second home ground in Launceston – so do Hawthorn still represent the community of Hawthorn? Go figure."<sup>150</sup>

Another example of money and marketing needs being placed ahead of supporter wants by administrators and board members is changing names. In 1997, the Footscray Football club changed their name to the 'Western Bulldogs' in an attempt to attract

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<sup>148</sup> B Wilson, *Pumping Up the Footy*, in D Rowe, and G Lawrence, (eds.), *Sport and Leisure: Trends in Australian Popular Culture*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, Sydney, 1990, p. 30.

<sup>149</sup> J Ralph, *Putting the Hawks back on the map*, in the *Herald Sun*, 19 August 2007, p. 96.

<sup>150</sup> P Di Sisto, *Interview*, 14 March 2006.

supporters from the entire western suburbs and not just Footscray. Therefore, who do the Western Bulldogs represent now? While they most definitely were once a team that represented the community of Footscray, do they still represent Footscray? Two years later the North Melbourne Football Club dropped the 'North Melbourne' part of their name to be simply known as the 'Kangaroos.' This was done to attract supporters from around the nation and not just one small suburb of one city. This year, in a bid to return to their roots and identity, the 'Kangaroos' have changed back to 'North Melbourne.'

To be fair, such is the wide spread reach of all football clubs that few clubs now truly only represent the suburb of which they originally spawned, yet it is proof of how the game has changed and evolved and how marketing and money is most definitely of extreme importance, sometimes even more so than the needs of the supporters.

This is highlighted by the fact that several Melbourne clubs, especially those in more financial strife than others, often sell home games to interstate venues and governments in return for a monetary gain. In 2008, the Western Bulldogs, the Kangaroos, Hawthorn and Melbourne all sold at least one of their home games in Melbourne to an interstate venue for financial gain. This meant that all of their supporters were unable to watch them live over the weekend, but such was their need for money and financial security, their administrators saw it as the more viable option.

Furthermore, there had been continued suggestion by many in the football world that the Kangaroos may be forced to relocate to the Gold Coast in Queensland to attract sponsors, supporters and corporate money in a market that does not have any other competition at AFL level. While the Melbourne based Kangaroos supporters would ultimately have their side taken away from them, the need for money in today's AFL industry may dictate that the relocation of the Kangaroos to the Gold Coast is necessary. Presently, they have vowed to stay in Melbourne as the North Melbourne Football Club; however, the Kangaroos may simply have to act economic rationally ahead of acting in the interests of passion and tradition to survive.

Essendon player James Hird, who played 253 games for the financially successful Essendon Football Club, believes that the game needs to be protected from the corporate dollar to ensure that the community bond and culture of the game does not disintegrate. In an article that Hird wrote for the *'Herald Sun'*, he stated:

Take the game away from the traditional supporter, send it interstate, put it behind glass for the corporates who don't care if they watch the game in Queensland or Melbourne and you will slowly lose the unique culture that is Australian rules...don't let the corporates who have not paid for a ticket to a game of footy in 25 years have more of a say than the basic footy club member who will always be there.<sup>151</sup>

Again, this is another example of money replacing the more traditional community feel. Clubs, as they search for a financial edge are less and less a true representation of what they once were and who they once represented.

And, Tim Watson sees this as necessary:

I think there is still a tribalism that is still connected to the supporter and the fan...there is still a passion that they generate from being apart of the club, but I think that it has moved away from the traditional, suburban home of the club and I think it has been a necessity too because clubs understand that to be (financially) successful they need to expand and have supporters not only around Victoria, but across the country too.<sup>152</sup>

This suggests that financial considerations are driving the decisions of AFL football clubs. Martin Flanagan accepts that it is a matter of survival. "I think Collingwood left

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<sup>151</sup> J Hird, *Home is where the heart and soul is*, in the *Herald Sun*, 12 April 2006, p. 90.

<sup>152</sup> T Watson, *Interview*, 15 September 2006.

Collingwood because it thought that it could do better financially. And, I think the Bulldogs changed their name because it was the last throw of the dice.”<sup>153</sup>

In a world dominated by economic rationalism and neo liberal politics, it was deemed necessary by the administrators of these clubs to act in economic rationalist ways – that is, putting the potential for revenue and profit, above tradition or passion.

A further extension of this is the football colours and patterns that clubs traditionally wore week in week out. This is now changing for both monetary and television purposes and could be viewed as a further decline in tradition. Historically, AFL clubs only had football jumpers that they would wear every week regardless of who their opponents were or where they were playing. Now, though, this is not the case. Because of pressure from television broadcasters who claim that some clubs within the competition have colours that ‘clash’ with other teams when they are playing, clubs have been forced to abandon their traditional jumpers for certain games and instead wear an ‘alternate’ jumper.<sup>154</sup>

Admittedly, many clubs and their supporters do not have a problem with this. However, some clubs such as Collingwood and Essendon resisted having to have an alternate strip until the AFL enforced it upon them earlier this year. In short, Collingwood and Essendon felt that they did not want to abandon their original jumpers which represented over one hundred years of tradition and history just because television audiences claimed that they had trouble distinguishing between their colours and the colours of their opponents.

This is another example of tradition being overlooked for money and is yet another example of the influence that television has in the game of AFL football. A similar contention was stated by the ‘*Herald Sun*’ when they argued that the AFL forcing clubs

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<sup>153</sup> M Flanagan, *Interview*, 12 March 2006.

<sup>154</sup> G Baum, *AFL delivers a jumper punch to fans’ hearts*, in *The Age online*, [www.theage.com.au/realfooty/articles/2006/04/11/1144521337033.html](http://www.theage.com.au/realfooty/articles/2006/04/11/1144521337033.html), 12 April 2006.

to change their jumpers was to risk “undermining the code’s strongest hold on the fans – tradition”.<sup>155</sup> Because television broadcasters pour so much money into the AFL, they are considered the most important stake holders in the game. Such is their importance to the AFL and the power that they have, clubs are continually expected to sacrifice aspects of their history, such as their player jumpers to satisfy television networks.

Interestingly, this issue, which could be considered as one of the more minor incidents within the game did indeed attain a large degree of media attention. And, furthermore, many supporters passionately protested the introduction of alternate jumpers for their teams, demanding that tradition and history be restored or maintained. Greg Baum said as much when he debated the issue in an article he had written for ‘*The Age*;

The typical football fan has great passion for his club, but no intimate involvement. He knows it only by its name, its nickname, its players’ names, and its symbols, and the most powerful of these is its guernsey.<sup>156</sup>

Whatever the case though, the above example is a definite example of the breakdown of community and tradition as the business and financial incentives of clubs and the AFL has changed. It seems more and more, football clubs are only a fading shadow of what their origins once were.

This is also reflected in the abandonment of State of Origin Football in the late 1990’s. While there was a one off game this year to celebrate 150 years of Australian Football, State of Origin football has not been a permanent fixture in the AFL calendar since the mid 1990’s. The whole notion of ‘State of Origin’ football was based on community and breaking down social and team barriers in order to represent football at a grass roots level. State of Origin was, as the name suggests, footballers returning to their origins to represent the greater community of the state from which they were born. It can be said

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<sup>155</sup> Herald Sun Editor, *Stripes forever*, in the *Herald Sun*, 12 April 2006, p 21.

<sup>156</sup> G Baum, 2006

that 'state of origin' promoted a form of togetherness at a grass roots level whereby different players from different clubs would come together to represent their state.

So, why did it stop?

From the perspective of Adorno and Horkheimer, it could be argued that it stopped because of the increased business and commercial interests of the clubs within the AFL. Footballers have become a valuable commodity for their club and because of the enormous emphasis on winning it seems that the players are considered too valuable a commodity to be risked by allowing them to play 'State of Origin' football. Because on-field success at club level can contribute to the club's cash flow and revenues through sponsorship, memberships, gate receipts and merchandise sales, the business aspect of the game has meant that players risking injury by playing in 'State of Origin' football may not be a viable option.

This is another example of business incentives of clubs influencing tradition. The fundamental theory relating to all of the examples mentioned in this chapter so far is that decisions made within football clubs are often far more concerned with economic and financial objectives than with their community.

The financial drive in the AFL has also affected the players and coaches within the clubs. In fact, the increased influence and impact of the media in football has probably affected coaches and players as much as any other component of the game. The role of the coach in today's game has changed dramatically over the past decades. Such is the demand for money, supporters, members and corporate sponsors, coaches now cannot afford to simply coach. They are now expected to promote and sell not just their football team, but their football club. They are now very much the face of their club. "They have to be able to woo sponsors and supporters and to do it they need to present an image that is not going to frighten the horses".<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> T Grant, *The hardest sell*, in the *Herald Sun*, 22 April 2006, p. 42.

The dramatic increase in money that has entered the game with the increased payments by television consortiums to broadcast it has meant that life for the AFL player has changed dramatically over the past two decades. While playing football was once considered a part time, leisure time, recreational activity, it is now considered by most players as their full time form of employment. And, coinciding with this is the fact that player payments over the last twenty years has substantially risen.

Today most players who play in the AFL earn a salary somewhere between \$60,000 and \$300,000, while three players in the competition earn in excess of \$800,000 per year. The average wage for a player who has played at least one game of AFL football in 2007 was \$213,952.<sup>158</sup> Highlighting the increased role of money for a player in the AFL is the fact that in 1991, the Total Player Payments per club in the AFL was \$1.5 million - that is, \$1.5 million was divided between all of the players on any team's list. Today the Total Player Payments per club in 2008 was \$8.5 million and the players demanded an increase of 17.9% each year over the life of the current broadcasting rights agreement.<sup>159</sup>

Therefore, the role of money in football has stretched beyond the parameters of the AFL body and its clubs. As can be seen, money has become a central part of an AFL footballer's career. With this increased money for players in football have come many other consequences and issues for players in today's commercial game. Certainly the issue of player loyalty to their clubs with the advent of the new age of professionalism must be raised here.

Do players play for the love of their club and the love of the game, or do they put financial objectives ahead of loyalty to their club? That is to say, would a player leave the club that he is playing for simply to earn more money elsewhere? The simple answer is yes they would and yes they have.

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<sup>158</sup> M Sheahan, *Playing for keeps in the dash for cash*, in the *Herald Sun*, 21 March 2006, p. 102.

<sup>159</sup> D Barrett, *Wage war on the horizon*, in the *Herald Sun*, 24 May 2005, p. 85.

This issue was first raised in 1964 when Melbourne champion Ronald Barassi left the Melbourne Football Club to coach the Carlton Football Club. It was the first time a champion player of his status in the game had left the club that he represented to represent another, raising questions of loyalty and the old creed of ‘playing for your jumper.’ This signalled a major change in the VFL as it was the first time in the league’s history that a famous player of one club had left it for another based on financial reasons.

It was an appointment that sent shock waves reverberating through the entire world of Australian football; to some it seemed as if the very foundations on which the game itself was built had been torn asunder – indeed some maintain that the game has never been the same since.<sup>160</sup>

His decision to move to Princes Park in order to pursue his ambition caused unprecedented furore.<sup>161</sup>

It was the first time a big name player, who very much represented the heart and soul of the Melbourne Football Club, had left one club to go to another, putting personal ambition and financial gain ahead of the club. It seemed to many that the impending age of professionalism was changing the mentality of players and their obligations to their club. Many feared that as money within the game increased, players would increasingly become self interested and less loyal to their club and team mates. The game was becoming a business and form of employment and in that the foundations of loyalty, community and tribal spirit was crumbling.

It is accepted as one of the truisms of Australian Football that at that moment the old creed of playing for your guernsey, which had been the staple during the Jack Dyer years and so much of the mythology of Australian football around it – that

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<sup>160</sup> Fullpointsfooty, online, [www.fullpointsfooty.net/carlton](http://www.fullpointsfooty.net/carlton), 30 August 2007.

<sup>161</sup> Fullpointsfooty, online, 2007

that's the first moment at which that mythology is now openly challenged, and then Barassi goes to Carlton and then North Melbourne and evolves the notion of professionalism. It's a fundamentally different idea of the way you play the game.<sup>162</sup>

Certainly it can be argued that the mentality of footballers playing the game today has to be different from what it was prior to the age of money and professionalism, if for no other reason than because the idea of playing for hundreds of thousands of dollars once simply did not exist. Footballers played only because they enjoyed playing the game.

Retired Essendon defender, Mal Michael, who played for Essendon after playing for Collingwood and Brisbane, supported the notion that an AFL player's position within a team and relationship with a club is now based on money and monetary contracts, in an interview with the *Herald Sun*.

The problem is we sign contracts and when they expire that's it. There is no loyalty.<sup>163</sup>

There have been several players who have changed clubs for money since Barassi in 1964, most recently Nathan Brown, when he left the Bulldogs to play for Richmond, and Chris Judd, arguably the best player in the competition, who at the end of 2007 decided to leave the West Coast Eagles to move back to his home state of Victoria.

Judd nominated four Victorian based teams that he wished to play for before finally choosing Carlton, a team that was reportedly willing to pay him more money than the other three clubs contending for his services.

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<sup>162</sup> Fullpointsfooty, online, 2007.

<sup>163</sup> J Ralph, *No Looking Back*, in the *Herald Sun*, 29 February 2008, p. 106.

However it also must be noted that most players do not change clubs, particularly high profile players who do often attract interest from rival clubs, generally stay with their original clubs, even for less money. One such example of this is Chris Grant, who rejected an offer from Port Adelaide to stay with the Western Bulldogs in the late 1990's even though he received less money by staying put.

The players have not simply increased their monetary prowess over the last two decades from just playing football. It must be said that the players have not missed out on the consequences – both negative and positive – of the media's increased role in football and the evolution of the AFL from a sport, to a sport within the entertainment industry. The increased coverage of matches, matches with highlights throughout and slow motion replays has meant that the players of today are followed and analysed like never before. When television first started covering games of AFL football, any one team could only be shown on television for up to half an hour of any one week. Now though, all matches are shown in their entirety, and, as a result the players in the AFL are seen playing more than ever before. This makes them better known than ever before.

Also, the AFL's move into the entertainment industry has meant that the players in the AFL are now very much seen as celebrities. While players were once interviewed on radio and television shows about the game, milestones and their club, today's entertainment programs such as *'The Footy Show'* and *'Before the Game'* focus as much on the footballer and their personality as it does the game of AFL football.

As mentioned above, one of the consequences of this is that players are now paid more than ever before and as such now think of the sport they play as their form of employment. However, another consequence of the fierce media coverage of football is that footballers have in many respects lost their anonymity and it seems that while journalists continue to seek the next big 'football story' to win the ratings, players' privacy is continually compromised.

This was never better displayed than recently when Channel *Seven* opened their nightly news bulletin with a story about AFL players taking drugs. This story came to light when the Seven Network purchased private and confidential medical records between doctor and patient from a woman who allegedly found them in a gutter.

Tim Watson says that the increased media attention on football and footballers has removed the personalities from the game, as players are now more than ever too afraid to express themselves through fear that they will tarnish the 'brand' of their club.

They don't have the anonymity or the social life that players once had. There has been a sanitisation of the game with the process of full time professionalism, and the characters that we talked about were genuine characters because they may have been a little overweight, or they may have been a little more social than someone else, but that type of bloke is not able to exist anymore. That fellow is not tolerated anymore...and consequently we have lost that character out of the game.<sup>164</sup>

And, this professionalism of the game that Watson speaks about has most definitely grown. While football training up until the early 1990's consisted mostly of training two times a week and playing on the weekends, this has changed dramatically. According to St Kilda player Austin Jones who was interviewed by the '*Herald Sun*' in 2006, football training is now 30-40 hours a week with most players doing an extra 15-20 hours extra with stretching, physio and gym work.<sup>165</sup>

As well as that players now have rehabilitation sessions, media commitments, community work and other such obligations that mean the life of an AFL footballer is now a full time form of employment. And while player payments have increased, the enjoyment that the

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<sup>164</sup> T Watson, *Interview*, 15 September 2006

<sup>165</sup> T Grant, *The reluctant star*, in the *Herald Sun Weekend*, 22 April 2006, p. 10-11.

players have for the game has for some decreased as the professionalism of the game and business orientation of the game has increased.

Austin Jones in his interview with the *'Herald Sun'* said, "I just think that the fun in the game has dwindled so much. There's no light moments. It's just a business and that's the sole aim."<sup>166</sup>

So, while Jones went from receiving \$70,000 in his fourth year of football to just over \$200,000 in his final year, the passion and enjoyment that he had for the game decreased as the professionalism of the game increased. For him the mateship and camaraderie that typically characterised a football club decreased as the business aspect of the game increased.<sup>167</sup>

Essendon champion James Hird, who played AFL football from 1992 until the end of 2007 concurred with these sentiments in a recent interview he did in the *'Herald Sun'* in the weeks leading up to his retirement.

The thing I miss is, you finish a game of footy, you just can't go out with the whole team and have a few beers. Now if you play at night the recovery finishes at one (o'clock), and that prevents that whole team bonding...the footy club is the footy club, but not in the traditional sense any more because of the professionalism you have to keep.<sup>168</sup>

The AFL, then, is now saturated in money. However, it should be noted here, that while all players seem to enjoy the money that they receive, many mourn the loss of a certain level of enjoyment that came with the semi professional era of years gone by.

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<sup>166</sup> Cited in T Grant, 2006

<sup>167</sup> T Grant, 2006

<sup>168</sup> Cited in Robinson, M., in the *Herald Sun*, 2007

This can be related back to the theories of Huizinga. In his book *'Homo Ludens,'* Huizinga discusses the element of 'play' and suggests that the definition of 'play' has changed over time, taking on characteristics of seriousness. Austin Jones has suggested the 'serious' element of 'play' has diminished the 'fun' and 'enjoyment' element that play once provided when it was considered an expression of the people.

Furthermore, if the 'community' has been diminished within the AFL clubs in favour of economic rational decision making, then the relationships that supporters share with its club appears to be less genuine and in many ways determined by money.

As this chapter has shown, money appears to be influencing the micro structure of the AFL on almost all levels of the competition – from tradition, loyalty, player enjoyment and club colours to the names of clubs and the grounds they play and train on. And, because there has been such a drastic increase in economic rationalist and neo liberal decision making within the AFL, there has also been a dramatic increase in the search for economic capital – by both the AFL clubs and their players – to succeed on and off the playing field. The consequences of this are that the community and tradition of AFL clubs and even some players are now preceded by economic objectives and commercial incentives in almost all facets of the AFL, and furthermore, as the amount of economic capital has increased within the game, so too has the 'serious' element of playing the game for the competitors, undermining notions of player loyalty and enjoyment. Increasingly, the game is driven by money.

However, while the game and the community surrounding it does seem to be continually preceded by the need and desire for money, postmodern theory has been used in defence of the commercial shift in the game and also to celebrate the game's continuing involvement in the grass roots of its community and in its ability to break down class and social barriers rather than exacerbating them. However, as the following chapter shows, even these can be, and indeed are, rebutted to support the claim that the increased economic rationalist objectives within the game has transformed the AFL into the entertainment industry, which has ultimately threatened the genuine community.

## Chapter Seven – Grass Roots Football

In the previous chapters of this thesis there has been much discussion about the ways in which the current state of the AFL and its clubs reflects the dominant capitalist nature of society. However, it must be noted that there is strong opposition to this theory, especially when compared to other sports and sporting leagues such as the EPL.

Utilising ‘modernist’ social theory, it has been argued in this thesis how the AFL, as an item of culture, is now merely a reflection of the money making incentives and priorities of the capitalist world, and as such, AFL football has been altered from an item of folk culture to something that is now reminiscent of a form of packaged, commercial, popular culture that is now a part of the entertainment industry.

However, postmodernists tend to reject such views, arguing that because, by definition, they suggest there are no dominant meanings, narratives or interpretations within society, there is nothing to promote and legitimise. Certainly from the perspective of Terry Eagleton’s book *‘The illusions of Postmodernism’*, it can be argued that AFL football is contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, and would reject any notion of AFL football legitimising any form of economic system.<sup>169</sup> Postmodernists would also argue that AFL football is still very much an expression of the people as the people can take from the game what they want – a game, a business or any thing in between.

And, those who do support and promote economic rationalism and neo liberal policy would argue that the efficient and productive nature of the AFL, as it searches for any form of monetary advantage, has simply served to ensure that the AFL has never been better, both to play and to watch. They would indeed celebrate the AFL taking on capitalist characteristics, believing that the competition and its clubs will be stronger for it and the experience both of viewing the game on television and at the ground would also be enhanced through implementing business priorities.

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<sup>169</sup> T Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1996, p. vii.

Indeed though, in its own right the AFL has maintained some equalitarian characteristics and grass roots support that offer an insight into how the game was before the commercial and entertainment age of today, and as such, offers an insight into how the game has changed. Certainly it can be argued that the AFL system of operation does not reflect pure capitalism as the AFL body does intervene within the operations of the league and its sixteen clubs. The clearest of these examples is the equalisation policy in place within the competition today.

The very fact that the AFL has capped the total amount that any one team can pay its entire playing list is hardly a characteristic of pure free market capitalism at work within the AFL. A pure capitalist system would allow clubs to attain whatever monetary power they were capable of and spend as much money on players as they wished. The trading, swapping and recruiting of players would be a reflection of the market value and monetary power of the AFL and the players within it. However, within the current system, the AFL intervention within the process is designed at enhancing equality within the AFL, reducing the power of the wealthier clubs and supporting the poorer clubs with their efforts to be competitive and successful. This form of management is far more reminiscent of equalitarianism than pure capitalism – but was only introduced because the strength of money within the game needed regulating.

The draft is another example of the AFL promoting equality within the competition. It is set up in a way that ensures that the least successful clubs have the opportunity to recruit the best players available in the draft. This removes the power of money from the recruiting process meaning that the richest club's first selection in the draft is not determined by how much money they have, but rather what their position on the ladder at the end of the previous year. In a pure capitalist model of recruitment, the draft would not exist. Instead, players would be lured by clubs and would make their decision on the best offer that any given club could present them with. Money, of course, would be a central component of this and often the best player of the draft would play for the club that offered him the best monetary deal. Again, the current system is a representation of

the desired and actively sought after equality within the AFL, implemented and maintained by the AFL. This form of government (AFL) intervention is another example of the equalitarian nature of the competition and its operating set up, but, yet again, was only implemented through a need to regulate the increasing power of 'economic capital' within the AFL.

So too is the distribution funds that are given by the AFL to struggling clubs to ensure that they can operate and function within the competition. Last year, the Kangaroos, Western Bulldogs, Carlton and Melbourne all received over \$8 million dollars from the AFL to ensure that they could meet the operation demands necessary for survival within the competition.<sup>170</sup> Within a more capitalist situation, this simply would not happen. Instead of any form of government assistance, clubs would be left to their own devices to ensure that they could stay operational, for within a pure capitalist economy there is little if any government intervention within the market. Essentially though, this highlights the equal and fair nature of the AFL, which attempts to make the premiership cup as accessible to all clubs as possible, regardless of their financial situation.

The AFL's willingness to donate money and intervene within the AFL's economy also stretches to individual club facilities to ensure that they can all maintain their spiritual home in their traditional suburb of representation. In June 2006, the AFL announced that it would donate \$55 million in conjunction with the 'State Government' to seven Victorian teams to ensure that all seven teams could refurbish and develop their home base within their traditional grass roots homeland. St Kilda was the biggest beneficiary receiving \$16.5 million (who are now considering moving their home base to Frankston).<sup>171</sup> This shows the AFL's commitment to sustaining and developing grass roots support and community development within its football clubs. This example is in complete contrast to the claims that the need and thirst for money is breaking down grass roots community support. However, it also shows that perhaps money is the now at the

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<sup>170</sup> AFL, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), 2007.

<sup>171</sup> Stevens, M., and Pierik, J., *Stands and deliver*, in the *Herald Sun*, 8/6/2006.

heart of 'grass roots' survival – without the AFL's monetary assistance, these clubs may have been forced to relocate their training facilities to another suburb or even interstate.

Also, the AFL, as the ruling body of the competition, has intervened within matches to determine results and other outcomes of matches. In 2006 a match was played in Launceston, Tasmania, between the Fremantle Dockers and St Kilda. When the final siren sounded the Fremantle Dockers were leading by a point, however the umpires did not hear the siren and allowed play to go on. St Kilda then kicked a point to even the scores and then play was called to a stop by the umpires. While a draw was the official result following the game, the AFL met in the early days of the following week to intervene and change the result to a Fremantle win. This is an example of the influence and impact of the governing body within the AFL, and, remembering that pure capitalism does not promote such intervention, this example creates further proof that the AFL is not purely an economic entity.

And, for all of the discussion and apparent need for money that has been discussed through the preceding chapters of this thesis, it appears that the thought of playing for money is not high on the priority list for many of the competing clubs within the AFL. While the teams that play deep into the finals do receive prize money and reward for the effort, many leagues of various sports around the world play for money on a weekly basis. When this model was suggested by Richmond coach Terry Wallace to be introduced into the AFL, it was met with a negative response from the wider football community. Many people claimed that football clubs do not need the lure of prize money to motivate them for success.<sup>172</sup>

This appears also the case for the players of the AFL. While it is difficult to ignore the fact that the players are now paid more as a collective group than any group that played before them, according to Kangaroos champion Wayne Carey, who captained North

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<sup>172</sup> M Stevens, *Let's play for cash*, in the *Herald Sun*, 1 June 2006, p.110.

Melbourne's 1996 and 1999 premierships, players still play football for the aim of team success, not money.

You don't play football for the money; you play for the premierships...the feeling (of winning a premiership) is unbelievable.<sup>173</sup>

As has already been stated, Adorno and Horkheimer would argue that AFL football is now less a representation of the community than ever before. They would also suggest that the game has been taken away from the community and sold back to consumers in the form of entertainment as a form of popular culture. While it was once an item of folk culture and an expression of the community, it is now sold to the community in order to make money. This though, can be argued against. In 2006 the AFL players and their clubs reached 80,000 students across Australia, 422 primary and secondary schools, 3,700 hospital patients, raised \$83,000 for local communities and gave 14,900 hours of their time to the community while the AFL donated \$4 million to the community. As well as that the AFL has developed initiatives that have been developed for, and aimed at, the community of all ages, but particularly youth. Such programs include 'Auskick', 'Sports Ready Trainee Programs,' 'AFL foundation' and 'Community Camps', which take football clubs to various communities across the nation.<sup>174</sup>

As well as the above, in the next five years, the AFL will spend \$1.4 billion of which \$208 million will go to the community programs such as the *NAB Auskick* program, building football in schools and local and league programs.<sup>175</sup>

Each club within the AFL also contributes to the community, either initiating or supporting community programs and causes. One such example is the Essendon Football Club. In the 2006 season the Essendon Football Club outlined that each player has

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<sup>173</sup> W Carey, *3AW football*, 14 April 2007, 2.00 pm.

<sup>174</sup> D Matthews, *The AFL Growth Challenge*, online, [www.afl.com.au](http://www.afl.com.au), 22 July 2007.

<sup>175</sup> AFL, *Next Generation DVD*, 2007.

fifteen club appearances and six AFL appearances a year. More than 600 of those appearances were for community based activities. That totals fifteen appearances a week for forty weeks. Of the Essendon players, Andrew Welsh is an ambassador for the EFC multicultural program, Scott Lucas is an ambassador for the *Problem Gambling* partnership, Adam Ramanauskas is a patron for the 'Relay for Life', and Jason Winderlich was presented with the 'Bill Hutchison' award for his contribution to the club's community initiatives. As well as this specific player involvement, the club donated \$246,000 to its 10 affiliated sporting clubs and will give more than \$30,000 to cause related activities. \$60,000 was raised for the Cancer council when Essendon played the Melbourne Football Club in round 12 of 2006, while \$20,000 was raised for *Very Special Kids*. Essendon initiated or supported 28 community programs last year with their main community program being 'On The Ball,' which aims to improve the physical and mental health of adolescents by encouraging them to get involved in sport. Last year this program reached more than 2000 students and teachers/parents in Melbourne's north-west region and around Bendigo.<sup>176</sup> This community involvement of the Essendon Football Club shows that the AFL is still very much a part of the community and in touch with the grass roots supporters of the game.

This was particularly evident at the beginning of the 2006 season when six teenagers were killed after being hit by a car in the Sunraysia district near Mildura. Following the tragic event, Essendon and Richmond organised to play a practice match in Mildura to give the people of the area some enjoyment during what was a very difficult time for the Sunraysia community. Mike Sheahan wrote in his article for the *Herald Sun* that "the afternoon was an example of football's unique ability to bring people together in times of adversity...this wasn't about a result – this was football doing what it does best – reaching out to the grassroots."<sup>177</sup> In the same article, the AFL's grounds operations

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<sup>176</sup> S Perkin, *Fighting the good fight*, in the *Herald Sun: The Pulse*, 12 December 2006, p. 73.

<sup>177</sup> M Sheahan, *Tribute to teens*, in the *Herald Sun: Weekend Sport*, 18 March 2006, p. 41.

manager Jill Lindsay was quoted as saying, “We often underestimate the power of football to bring the people together.”<sup>178</sup>

This is a clear example of AFL football, as a part of the community, bringing people together and helping in times of adversity and tragedy. It can be argued that this is what makes football more than, or at least different to, a business. While the need for money is undeniably evident in almost all that football does, at times it is able to act as a catalyst for uniting the masses. In this example, two football teams gathered to perform for a community in need of enjoyment and did it for the grass roots, not for the corporates and not for money. It was folk culture as folk culture was – a representation of the community, for the community and inspired by the community. It was not packaged or sold and it did not come in the form of a commodity. It was a raw expression of help that was embraced by the community of Sunraysia. This suggests that football still has elements of folk culture and is still very much an expression of the people.

As the above example also touches on, AFL football can also be seen as the great equaliser both on and off the field. On the football field social differences, hierarchies and markets count for little – regardless of one’s social status, race, religion or political beliefs all players can compete as one, together.

Likewise, supporters from different backgrounds can come together. The fact that many clubs have lost part of their sense of community from the suburb of which they were founded, means that clubs now have supporters from various parts of the country and various backgrounds. For example, of those people that barrack for, say, Essendon, some would be from Essendon, some would not. Some would be wealthy while others may be relatively poor. Some may be Catholic, others may be Anglican while others may be atheists. In short, AFL football can be seen as something that is subversive to upholding and sustaining the existing status quo as it can break down social barriers, unite people of difference together and challenge the existing status quo.

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<sup>178</sup> Cited in M Sheahan, 2006, p.44.

This example can also extend to race relations. This year Essendon was represented by Anglo Saxons, Aborigines a player born in Papua New Guinea and a Muslim. Bachar Houli made his debut for Essendon in round seven of 2007. While there has been some tension between white westerners and those of the Muslim community within society, on the field, they were all equal and as one. This is another example of how football can break down social barriers and unite the masses of society as equals. Martin Flanagan agrees, “I believe that there is no question that the AFL can be proud of the course that it has taken in race relations. One thing I will say is that sport has been ahead of society on the issue of race – it certainly has been in Australia with Australian football.”<sup>179</sup>

This further supports post-modernist theory that culture has a uniting effect on society. It is an experience that all can share for what they want it to be, together. As Dick Hebdige writes, “Culture can celebrate sub cultural forms simultaneously to bind together social groups and to express the plurality of cultural and ethical experience.”<sup>180</sup>

The football experience is something that all can share. No matter the colour, religion, wealth or political orientation of any given supporter, in attending an AFL football match, all can share in the same experience at the same time at the same ground. On that level AFL football can bind social groups of difference together.

This is also the case on the field. For example, Essendon and Collingwood are considered two of the wealthier Victorian teams in the competition. Both teams have solid and stable supporter bases, attract the largest crowds on average per game, have the most members of the Victorian teams, have new state of the art training facilities, have accumulated thirty premierships in their histories between them and have little if any trouble negotiating multi million dollar sponsorship contracts with various corporate

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<sup>179</sup> M Flanagan, *Interview*, 12 March 2006.

<sup>180</sup> Cited in S Connor, *Post Modern Culture: An introduction into the theories of the contemporary*, Malden Mass, Blackwell, 1997, p. 207.

companies. They are, in global economic terms, the 'first world' teams of Victorian football.

By contrast, the Western Bulldogs and North Melbourne are 'third world.' They have fewer members, fewer supporters, average smaller crowds per game, have accumulated only five premierships between them, have poorer training facilities and as mentioned earlier in the chapter, they both rely on monetary assistance from the AFL to remain viable operating entities within the AFL.

Yet, for all the off field differences in wealth and prosperity, on any given day, on the football field, the 'third world' teams can be the equal of and, indeed, superior to the 'first world' teams. Certainly last year the Western Bulldogs defeated Essendon and while the Bulldogs and the Kangaroos finished in the final eight of the competition last year, Essendon could manage only twelfth. Therefore, the AFL can be seen as something that does not exacerbate differences, but rather diminishes them and equalises all forms of life. This is another characteristic of AFL football that is distinctly different to capitalism.

And, it is often the community aspect of AFL football that is considered of premium importance to those involved – certainly more so than any form of individual recognition. While there are several individual awards handed out to players throughout the year that ultimately serve to highlight individual brilliance such as the 'Brownlow medal', the 'Coleman medal' and individual club 'Best and Fairest' awards, it is the 'premier cup' that is considered by the players as the ultimate goal that they are all striving to achieve. The Premiership Cup is something that only a team can achieve, together, as a type of 'community.' 'Teamwork' is what is required more so than any other form of individual brilliance. Certainly the 'community' aspect of any team within team sports such as the AFL is of greater significance than any form of individual importance.

Perhaps this argument is best summed up with an old, tried but true cliché that says '*a champion team will always beat a team of champions.*' At its most basic, this is saying

that no matter how brilliant, how talented, or how skilled a group of individuals are, they will never be strong enough, talented enough or unique enough to defeat the unity, bond, understanding and the community of a ‘champion team.’ This was supported in cricketing circles two years ago when a *World Eleven* team, consisting of some of the most skilled, talented and capable cricketers from around the world were comprehensively beaten by an *Australian Eleven*, who played together often and appeared to have a bond and understanding that the *World Eleven* could not match. The ‘team’ had defeated the group of ‘individuals.’

Garry Whannel argues that sport is subversive to dominant ideologies, and does not promote typical capitalist ideals of winning, competition and individualism. On the contrary, sport can be viewed as something far different. He believes that sport can be positively related to cooperation, friendship, support, genuine human inspiration, fun, health and being social. Indeed it can be argued that sport, including AFL football, can promote the notions of loyalty, togetherness and teamwork.<sup>181</sup> It would be difficult to argue that all successful AFL teams who have reached the ultimate of their sport by winning a premiership did not have at least some, if not all of these characteristics both on the day of the Grand Final and throughout the year. As Rex Hunt states, “you can’t win a premiership without a common, understood goal. It is something that you can only achieve if you all want it and all understand how to get it.”<sup>182</sup>

And while it has already been acknowledged that the AFL has become more commercial, packaged and commodified and is certainly now defined as an industry within the greater economy, it can be argued that the AFL is still a game. Supporters, players, coaches, administrators and all other stakeholders within the games know that after any one week of the home and away season any one result of any one match will not change or alter the make up or structure of the world, the nation’s productivity will remain relatively unchanged, poverty will not have been altered and wealth will not have been redirected.

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<sup>181</sup> Cited in G Lawrence and D Rowe, *Power Play: The Commercialisation of Australian Sport*, Hale and Iremonger Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1986, p. 233.

<sup>182</sup> R Hunt, *Interview*, 10 October 2006.

To this extent the AFL is still a game that has consequences far less significant than other national and certainly world current affairs, economical and political issues.

To this extent, another postmodernist argument can be supported and argued.

Postmodernists would argue that players, supporters, administrators, coaches and viewers at home can take from the game what they wish to. There is no dominant meaning and as a result there is no dominant ideology to promote or uphold. Nothing can be promoted or legitimised. AFL football is what you want it to be – a sport, a past time, a recreation or leisure time activity. And as already noted, because of this it can actually work against traditional capitalist ideals and for community, mateship, equality and togetherness. The ‘community’ and ‘spirit of the game’ reigns supreme over the individual, money and even winning.

This can be supported by an on field example witnessed in the season of 2006 in a match between Essendon and the Brisbane Lions. In the final quarter of the match, Brisbane ruckman Jamie Charman collided heavily with his Essendon opponent David Hille, hit the ground and dislocated his shoulder. While Charman was in clear distress, and while the game continued at a typically frenetic pace around him, David Hille’s reaction was to stop competing, stop playing and to check if his opponent needed assistance. He then waved to the Brisbane medical team for support and then moved on.

Tim Lane, who witnessed the event, wrote in his article for ‘*The Age*:’

It’s an image that football should draw on and celebrate. It could use it to emphasise that while it is now a business, this is still a human activity and is still sport.<sup>183</sup>

This AFL football example is not dissimilar to the time when, in a running race, John Landy stopped mid race to help his nearest rival, Ron Clarke, who had fallen, before he

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<sup>183</sup> T Lane, *Hille shows just how great the game can be*, in *The Age online*, [www.theage.com.au/realfooty](http://www.theage.com.au/realfooty), 31 July 2006.

went on to win the running race. These examples show, postmodernists would argue, a unique sporting spirit and element of sportsmanship that is distinctly different from an industry or business more concerned with money and profit than sporting respect and spirit. They would also tend to suggest that sport has the ability to inspire the masses far more than any form of business or money making entity.

In this sense, the AFL has retained elements of its folk culture roots and is indeed something more than a business.

Yet for all of the efforts made by the AFL to maintain elements of community spirit and to minimise the impact of money in on-field performance, it cannot be denied that money is still at the heart of the AFL's operation. In fact it is because money's presence and impact on the game has grown so substantially through the last two decades that forms of equalisation policy and intervention that the AFL has implemented. If money were not an issue these actions would not have been necessary. However, such is the importance of wealth and money within the game for clubs to survive, the AFL has had to move to ensure that the distinction between the rich and the poor is minimised. Yet by doing this, the presence of money is merely highlighted, justifying Bourdieu's claims that the cultural field has lost its autonomy to the economic field and as a result it is economic capital that is at the heart of power within the culture (or in this case the AFL) field.

This also appears to be the case for the players. While players and ex players such as Wayne Carey have publicly stated that they did not ever play for the money ahead of team success, the presence of economic capital (money) cannot be denied. As a collective playing group the current playing list receives more money than any other group before them ever has. So, while it may not be the most important aspect of their playing career, it is an aspect that has grown as the business model of the AFL has flourished. Players now don't just play AFL football, they work for their club; that is to say that playing football is now also their job – so too is visiting schools, hospitals and other community organisations. They provide labour in the form of playing football and

promoting their football club, and their club rewards them with a wage. This is a distinct difference to the semi profession of VFL/AFL football when players simply played football without the presence or issue of money.

And while football can be described as the great equaliser, within any ground at any game, inequalities are apparent. For example, although people of all ages, races, religions and social status can attend any one game and share the same experience together as one, the type of experience is often determined by one's wealth and can be a reflection of the inequalities outside of the football ground and in society. While the relatively poor purchase the cheaper seats in the stadiums, society's 'rich' can support their team from better vantage points or even in corporate boxes. This level of inequality is particularly evident at the 'Telstra Dome' where each level of seats reflects the price of seating, which indicates that each level can be described as a level of social status. The seats on the very top level are the cheapest. The seats on the bottom level are more expensive. The seats on the middle level are associated with an exclusive and expensive 'Medallion Club' while others can pay even more to own or participate in watching from a corporate box. These different levels mean that the entire 'football experience' is determined by wealth and how much money supporters can, or are willing to, spend on watching a game.

Peter Di Sisto supported this claim when he noted:

There is definite inequality in the grand stands. The rich sit in the best seats with the best memberships and even in corporate boxes. Those that cannot afford it sit way up the back of the grand stands.<sup>184</sup>

It can be argued that this is hegemonic in that the social hierarchy within the ground reflects the social hierarchy in society.

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<sup>184</sup> P Di Sisto, *Interview*, 14 March 2006.

And, on field equality is perhaps not as evident as argued earlier. While it is undeniably true that 'third' world teams can and indeed do defeat their 'first' world counterparts, the fact that Essendon, Carlton and Collingwood have amassed forty six premierships between them while the Kangaroos, Western Bulldogs and St Kilda have only combined to win six premierships, it can also be argued that it is those with the most money that win most often.

It can also be argued that this does indeed reflect society and the wider community and that this makes AFL football hegemonic. Furthermore, thinkers such as Lawrence and Rowe (1986) extend this idea to suggest that sport can actually promote capitalist ideologies, helping render capitalism as durable and sustainable.

In their book '*Power Play: The Commercialisation of Australian Sport*,' Rowe and Lawrence argue that televised sport constantly reminds viewers of dedication, hard work, persistence, skill, efficiency and maximum effort. This, they argue, legitimates the existing structure of authority, hierarchy and existing status quo. They also argue that sport socialises viewers to accept the values of capitalism, emphasising the 'best' and promoting the importance of being 'number one.'<sup>185</sup>

Lawrence and Rowe also write that sport limits the acceptance of what is fair, normal and desirable, stressing the conformity of rules and compliance to authority – making rules seem common sense. Finally, they write that sport provides the proletariat with the myth of upward social mobility, keeping them content and at bay while also providing a distraction and escapism from their daily suppression.<sup>186</sup>

As the popularity of watching sport has increased, perhaps society has become less active in other collective efforts. While race relations or wealth inequalities may appear subversive to society trends on the football ground or in the grand stands, after the weekend, what are the collective efforts of society to mend race and inequality problems?

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<sup>185</sup> G Lawrence, and D Rowe, *Power Play: The Commercialisation of Australian Sport*, Hale and Iremonger Pty Ltd., Sydney, 1986, p. 169-176.

<sup>186</sup> G Lawrence and D Rowe, 1986, p. 169- 176.

Chomsky and Adorno and Horkheimer would argue that because society believes that these problems appear less evident in sport, they are distracted from fixing the issues in 'real life' – the community of which they a part.

The AFL, has, in many ways, maintained a definite sense of egalitarianism and its original characteristics of community, grassroots, folk culture need to be, and indeed have been, celebrated. It also shows that the AFL's current state may be part of a continuing 'commercial transformation' whereby the current link that the game has with the grass roots shows where the game has come from and how the game was and the increased commercialism of the game highlights where the game is going. The game has not yet been fully commercialised and commodified, yet, as has been shown, in its current 'transformation phase' it is progressing away from its links to its grass roots origins. This chapter has given an indication of these links and in doing so has given an insight into how the game was when it was 'only a game.'

As can be seen, even within the celebratory aspects of the game lie the undeniable link that the AFL now has with neo liberalism and economic capital in the entertainment age and the consequences that come with it, and as has already been discussed, the consequences of it can be seen to be undermining society's true sense of community.

## Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have attempted to show how VFL/AFL football has been commercialised and subsequently transformed from being part of folk culture to an item of popular culture and part of the entertainment industry. Also at the core of this analysis has been the consequence of such change for the community that surrounds the game.

From this analysis some key points cannot be denied. The game is now a business, which encompasses economic objectives, commercial incentives and due to its business orientation, money is now at the heart of the game. The AFL is now part of the entertainment industry and therefore, in an age of mass culture and consumerism, it has to compete against other forms of popular culture for the hearts and minds of consumers and to make their product more attractive than other forms of popular culture. The AFL says as much on its official web site.

Today, money is at the core of the AFL and the AFL's relationship with all of its major stakeholders. Channels *Seven*, *Ten* and *Foxtel* have combined to purchase the right to broadcast AFL football matches over five years for a record amount of \$780 million. AFL clubs are continually striving to earn enough money to not only survive, but to be competitive within a sixteen team competition, which, due to economic rational reform by the AFL, sees teams spread across the nation and continually looking to enter into new, untapped and financial markets. Players are now paid much more money by their clubs for their labour, and are contracted to their club based on a monetary agreement or contract. For the community of supporters, increasingly their interests are often placed behind the economic rationalist objectives of the club they support in order for their club to survive.

The AFL has, in some part, remained more equalitarian and accessible to its grass roots fans than what other sports, such as the EPL, appear to have; however, it is the role that the supporter and the community now play in relation to their club that has changed. As

already stated, the AFL is now not just a game. It has taken on commercial, monetary and business characteristics and the consequences of that go beyond the financial bottom line.

While games were once an expression of the people and defined by the shared and common values of the community, today money appears to have replaced this expression. For one, without money the AFL could no longer exist – Fitzroy supporters have already lost their club and community because of a lack of money. Furthermore, players play on monetary contracts – no matter how much they love to play, none of them play for free and increasingly, clubs with the most money appear to be those with the biggest chance of on and off the field success.

Therefore, there is little doubt that the AFL is now a part of the economy and that supporters are treated as consumers that are necessary to ensure that the AFL remains financially viable. As a result, the ‘sporting field’ has undoubtedly lost its autonomy to the economic field and has merged with the entertainment field, and furthermore, economic capital is at the heart of power and survival within the AFL competition.

For the community, their game has been taken away from them, commodified, and sold back to them as consumers. They no longer have the ownership of it that they once did. They can, and do, still attend matches to support their club as a community; however the connection that they have with each other is now more that they are all consumers of AFL football than that they are expressing their shared and common values and lifestyles, as folk culture once allowed them to. And while it does bring people of difference together, it does so only momentarily, while folk culture was a culture that was the expression of a community being together.

The supporters of AFL football clubs have had to take a back seat to economic rationalist and commercial objectives. They have seen their teams sell home matches, trade loved players to rival clubs, change the name of their team, sell their football jumpers to advertisers to make money, move their clubs home base and training facilities to suburbs outside their community, relocate to new cities to find a new market for sponsorship, and

as mentioned, one club's supporters has even seen their club merge and subsequently move interstate. If the community of a football club is preceded by the need for money, then the AFL, as an item of culture, is no longer a representation of the community and their values, but rather a form of popular culture, which can be sold to consumers to make money. In this transformation, the supporters of the AFL became consumers of a product, rather than the pure owners of the culture.

Ultimately, within the AFL, notions that typified the community such as loyalty and tradition have repeatedly been preceded by economic rationalist and commercial incentives, which has redefined the AFL as an item of popular culture and undermined the 'genuine community' in doing so.

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