

Media representations of Andy Murray

Ben Farndon looks at media representations of tennis player Andy Murray during the 2008 Wimbledon tennis tournament.

In emagazine 40, Dan Clayton illustrated how four extracts of journalism from 1900-2008 offered differing representations of youth crime. The new English Language AQA Specification A coursework unit requires students to investigate how groups, individuals, institutions or events are represented in three to five texts.

During the summer of 2008, Scottish tennis player Andy Murray's progress through Wimbledon offered another possible focus for such an investigation, this time looking at an individual rather than a group. His eventual journey from the first round (24th June) to a quarter final defeat to Rafael Nadal (2nd July) gave a bumper week-and-a-half of media coverage to draw on. This included the epic victory over Richard Gasquet (30th June), which was seen by 10.4 million BBC viewers at its peak. I hoped the available texts would offer a range of representations of this individual: probably starting with initial praise and hope and likely to end, ultimately, in despair. As the specification requires, the texts would be temporally linked. The nature of the topic allowed for a wide range of written and broadcast journalism, as well as texts from the Scottish press. Although the AS coursework unit only requires three to five texts, I collected together 13 for this study.

British or Scottish?

One interesting angle of representation I wanted to explore concerned nationality: as Andy Murray is Scottish, would he be referred to in the data as 'British', 'Scottish', or even 'English'? The latter was never used, and 'British' was only used infrequently in my data, usually found in a pre-modified noun phrase such as:

British ace Andy Murray... (The Sun, 25th June)

Reference to Murray's Scottish nationality was by far the most frequently found, and was always the case in the two Scottish press articles in my data:

...the 21-year-old from Dunblane... (Daily Record, 1st July)

The Scot... (Scotsman, 30th June)

Beyond such use of proper nouns, other journalistic choices offered representations of Murray as Scottish (both of these report that 5-set victory over Richard Gasquet):

This was Braveheart stuff (Daily Mirror, 1st July)

There have been many outrageous pieces of grand theatre...but this by the British No 1...takes the Scottish shortbread (The Times, 1st July)

However, the issue of Murray's nationality was used negatively in Tony Parsons' Daily Mirror opinion piece of the previous day, particularly in terms of the player's attitude to England:

It would be fantastic to see a Scot win the men's singles next Sunday. But deep in my bones I believe Andy Murray is one of those characters who genuinely dislike England and the English...And that's why, when Murray faces Frenchman Richard Gasquet on Centre Court later today, I will be shouting - vive la France! (Daily Mirror, 30th June)

This article also used the first person plural pronoun 'we' ('I don't really object to anyone despising the English - we can take it'), which positions the reader as English and moves them away from the shared notion of 'British'. The unifying sense of 'we' encourages the reader to collude with Parsons' opinion, whether they want to or not. Parsons' end-line suggestion of 'Murray Mount? It sounds like something you suck.' also portrays a certain mockery of the player and any adulation shown to him.

Murray as a contender

Naturally optimism about British sporting success ran high, and Murray was represented as a possible Wimbledon winner even after his first round victory:

The world No 11...is on course to be the first Brit since Fred Perry in 1936 to lift the trophy. (The Sun, 25th June)

Inevitably the focus of coverage was on Murray's performance. Grammatically, this resulted in Murray appearing frequently as the subject in active voice constructions. An example was 'Scot Andy, 21, beat French veteran Fabrice Santoro...' (The Sun, 25th June), rather than other options like 'Santoro lost to Andy' or passive 'Santoro was beaten by Andy' which, while synonymous in letting the reader know which player won or lost, would shift the focus more onto Santoro's rather than Murray's performance.

Murray as hero

Such optimism was furthered over the following days and rounds. This was conveyed mainly through the use of categories such as abstract nouns ('craftsmanship', 'brilliance' - Guardian, 29th June), adjectives ('brilliant performance', 'stunning strokes' - Guardian, 29th June) and verbs ('Andy Murray stormed to victory', 'Thousands packed Murray Mount' - The Sun, 25th June). The latter moves us into the area of hyperbole that often is found in sports journalism. This was continued with metaphors such as 'Murray earns shot at fellow young guns' (Observer headline, 29th June), that he 'came back from the dead' (Daily Mirror, 1st July) in his match with Richard Gasquet, where ultimately 'the miracle

came to pass' (Daily Mirror, 1st July), with its biblical lexis and grammatical construction. In all of these examples, there is an implicit admiration for Murray, perhaps best summarised by Andrew Castle's TV commentary at the end of this match:

and the crowd (.) adore this man (BBC TV, 30th June)

Murray as yob

In contrast to this, another representation that emerged is that of Murray as a hooligan, particularly following his Richard Gasquet match. In the initial aftermath of Murray's victory, his aggressive style was represented as a positive:

This was Braveheart stuff. Murray...pumping his fist, beating his chest, screaming at the crowd in his fury to succeed...We haven't seen fist-pumping like this since Connors was bursting blood vessels in the Eighties (Daily Mirror, 1st July)

However, the next day a more negative representation of this was presented to the audience. This can be nicely observed in the Daily Mail headline of 2nd July, 'Great win Andy. Pity about the yobbery!' in which the very traits praised by the Mirror were viewed as 'pure unadulterated rage', 'an ugly spectacle', 'like some second-rate Californian cage wrestler', and then broadened out to the issue of sportsmen's 'yobbish excess' affecting society as a whole. The traditions of tennis were also referenced in broadcasts of the day (BBC Radio 5 Breakfast, 2nd July):

Nicky Campbell:

he's very unlike our traditional tennis players (.) Tim (Henman) had his aggressive moments but all that stuff on court (.) he's very (.) kind of American in some ways isn't he

Jonathan Overend:

you're right (.) yesterday I was walking back through the grounds of Wimbledon Park.....some of them were just saying I don't like the way he (Murray) celebrates after every point like he's won Wimbledon

The tone of this radio extract is interestingly different from the press comments of the day, in that it seems rather more guarded in its criticism. Campbell's use of 'all that stuff' seems not to offer specific criticism, is almost euphemistic, and the choice of 'kind of' is a hedging device that suggests implied rather than outright criticism of Murray's 'American' temperament. Similarly the negativity in Overend's comment is mediated through others' opinions: he's merely reporting what people have said to him, rather than presenting the point as his own.

The mode of the texts could therefore be significant here. Most pieces of written sports journalism tend to be rather anonymous: although the writer may be named, any opinion is presented in the context of a multi-page sports section with a number of different contributors. On radio, contributors could be more vulnerable as one's image and personality is more obviously on display to the audience, with listeners likely to feel some degree of familiarity with the voices they hear daily. This could account for the seemingly more guarded comments discovered. Of course the BBC prides itself on neutrality of broadcasting, and in this context a Scottish presenter (Nicky Campbell) may wish to avoid any accusations of Murray bias either way. Clearly Parsons' previously quoted Daily Mirror comment is an exception to this theme: here a written text is prominently personality-based, and readers are likely to be more familiar with the writer and his views than in the more general sports report texts.

The audience is also significant in this respect. BBC Radio 5 is intended as a nationally broadcast station. However, the existence of The Scottish Sun and Scottish Daily Mirror newspapers, for example, could imply The Sun and Daily Mirror (which are in my data) are focused more on an English audience whose perceptions of Murray may be different from those of a Scottish audience.

Murray as physically strong

Much was made of Murray's increased physical strength during Wimbledon's first week: '...his superior strength and fitness compared to years past' (Scotsman, 30th June). You may remember that Murray's celebrations after the Gasquet match involved a display of his tensed bicep. This was complemented by Andrew Castle on the BBC TV commentary:

phenomenal performance (.) from the muscle man from Dunblane (4) haha (4) oh that was a muscular match

Keen to pick up on this theme, The Daily Record prepared its Scottish audience for the upcoming Nadal quarter final with the news:

Andy Murray last night claimed he can win the battle of the biceps against Rafael (1st July)

Murray as loser

... but of course he then lost in straight sets to Nadal on 2nd July. And here we saw a certain amount of schadenfreude from some of the media, often centred on the theme of Murray's strength which he was so keen to show two days earlier. The Times selected its verb carefully in the headline:

Murray outmuscled by Nadal

while The Sun suggested that:

Popeye (Murray) obviously forgot to take his spinach (3rd July)

Rather than being the initiator, Murray was now on the receiving end of such metaphors as Nadal's: human battering-ram [...] his enormous arsenal of weapons (The Sun, 3rd July)

Grammatically, Murray was still occupying subject position in sentences, but the focus of the accompanying verb phrases were now inabilities rather than abilities:

Murray simply could not cope with... (The Sun, 3rd July)

Conclusion

Over a short period of time, we can see the differing representations of an individual in media texts. These of course depend largely on the individual's ups-and-downs of performance, but the institutional source of the text and its likely audience (Scottish/English/British) can also have an impact. And equally, mode (spoken/written) appears to be of importance, as emerged from the analysis of Nicky Campbell's and Jonathan Overend's comments on Radio 5.

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