Gender in Sports Journalism: Literature Review

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In recent years there has been an increased advocacy for gender equality regarding sports. From allowing females to play football and hockey with their male counterparts, to granting female sports journalists locker room access, it appears to some that the influence of gender was fading away in sports media. But after researching the many roles that gender plays in sport coverage and sports broadcasting, it is apparent that societal norms and constructs are actively influencing how gender is regarded in sports journalism coverage. To address the research topic of gender in sports journalism, I collected and researched ten journal articles pertaining to the various ways gender bias and inequality is presented. Through the review of these articles I was able to gather information supporting the research question of, “do societal norms play a role in the continuation of gender inequality in sports coverage and journalism?”

The ten articles I analyzed address the following categories: inequality in sports journalism workplaces, sports commentator framing, male hegemony in sports journalism education, gender-based expectations in sport broadcasters, bias in sports airtime and coverage nationally and collegiately, as well how televised sports are perceived differently by viewers. By analyzing these articles and categories, I was able to establish a correlation between societal norms and the gender inequalities that are present within sports coverage and journalism.

The first article I analyzed, “The Invisible Woman: Female Sports Journalists In The Workplace,” by Miller and Miller, addresses how female sport journalists are treated differently than their male counterparts in the workplace. The reality that female sports journalists are discriminated against due to their gender is one of the many problems resulting from societal norms and expectations within the profession. This article addresses the assumption of society that woman are getting equal opportunity in sports journalism based on the number of females in sports journalism recently increasing, but when surveyed, the reality is, women are still running into “roadblocks” (Miller & Miller, 1995, p. 883). Results regarding perceived performance in the workplace showed that women were held to the same standard of accuracy as men, but that they were expected to know less background, history, and “lore” of sports than their male counterparts. 59% of women also reported that men expected them to know less about sports than male sports journalists (Miller & Miller, 1995, p. 886). This research reinforces my belief that while women are gaining more opportunities in the journalism field, societal norms are continuing to play a role in the perception of females journalists’ knowledge and performance.

The next article I researched, “The Effect of Sport Commentator Framing on Viewer Attitudes,” by Parker and Fink, addresses the effects of commentator framing of a female sport on viewer attitudes of female athletes. Parker and Fink’s study was based off of a variety of already existing research, centered around the framing theory, which is the idea that “attitudes and thoughts can be shaped or influenced simply by what information is presented and made to see important to as well as by what information is left out” (Parker & Fink, 2007, p. 116). After testing the perceptions of female athletes with positively or negatively framed commentary, the results showed a significant correlation of commentator framing to the viewer attitudes regarding the female sport performance. This research shows the influential role that commentators and the media have in influencing the perceptions of certain sports, by how they frame and report on certain sports and athletes. This directly addresses and relates to the idea presented in my research question; that much like commentator framing, societal norms have the ability to shape and perpetuate certain gender inequalities regarding coverage and the perception of athletes.

Another article that supports a similar idea is, “The Wide World of Sports Reporting: The Influence of of Gender-Based and Race-Based Expectations on Evaluations of Sports Reporters,” by Mastro, Seate, Blecha, & Gallegos. Research was conducted to examine the influence of gender and race-based norms of different sports on evaluations of newspaper reporters. The research was based on the communication accommodation theory, which analyzes how and why different groups and individuals alter their communication patterns and identities in inter-group contexts (Mastro, Seate, Blecha, & Gallegos, 2012, p. 459). The article addressed the hypothesis that the gender and race of sports newspaper reporters interacts with how the sport was covered, due to the implied expertise and qualifications of the reporters. Overall, results showed that gender played a role in the perception and qualifications of both men and traditionally male sports, as well as females in relation to traditionally female sports. By participants demonstrating bias towards different sports and sports commentators based on gender, the results beg the question of what factors and ideologies led to these bias and assumptions, which I believe is connected and supports my research question.

An article by Hardin and Shain, “Female Sports Journalist: Are We There Yet? ‘No’,” addresses the gender-based issues within the sports broadcasting profession. Research was comprised of information from five focus groups of female sports journalists. Information surrounding three research questions was collected, regarding the satisfaction of their profession, the characterization of their profession, as well as factors that affect tenure and promotional opportunities. The results from the focus groups reinforce several ideas, one being that sports journalism is a hard profession to get into as a female, due to the lack of education and mentorship that encourage women to pursue sports broadcasting (Hardin & Shain, 2005, p. 28). Even though all the participants were currently employed as sports journalists, results also showed the women were often, “the only female in an entire sports department,” in environments that were “hostile” (Hardin & Shain, 2005, p. 28). Along with feeling under represented in the profession, women also reported having to deal with attacks on their physical appearance, working harder to prove themselves, unequal pay, and fewer story opportunities (Hardin & Shain, 2005, p. 26-32). Lastly, results showed that there is a “glass ceiling” for many, regarding the opportunities for promotion within the field. This research brings to the light the obvious unfair standards that are present within the sports journalism profession, which I believe is related to the long-standing societal norms and expectations of male dominance within the industry.

“Passing it On: The Reinforcement of Male Hegemony in Sports Journalism Textbooks,” by Hardin, Dodd, and Lauffer touch on a slightly different category. This article focuses on the marginalization of women in sports media and in sports journalism educational textbooks due to male hegemony. The researchers start by stating that sports media coverage generally excludes women from coverage, with only 5-8% of total coverage of women’s sports even though 40% of sport participation is by women (Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer, 2006, p. 430). They go on to detail that this neglect in media “reinforces a value system that discriminates against women, both as athletes and as sports journalists” (Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer, 2006, p. 430). This discrimination carries over into the way sports journalists are trained in the newsroom and in the classroom, there is a lack of equitable coverage for women and men. This study specifically examines the course material for sports journalism students through the text books. By studying text and photos to see if they reinforce or combat against the hegemonic coverage of sports, and specifically target and encourage students to discourage stereotypes within the field. Results showed: overall, men outnumbered women 5 to 1 in the text, references to sports journalists were 89% made up by men and only 11% of women, and visually, 81% of all images were men (Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer, 2006, p. 436-439). The concept of hegemony in relation to media framing is that “the culture’s most powerful groups obtain consent of their leadership through the use of ideological norms” (Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer, 2006, p. 43). While this research reflects the enforcement of hegemony in relation to sports journalism textbooks, it appears to directly support the idea that societal norms play a role in gender in sports journalism education as well.   
 Another category that reflected the inequality of gender in sports coverage during the 2008 Olympic Games. The article, “Online coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games on the ABC, BBC, CBC, and TVNZ,” by Jones shows that the gender gap in air time and story numbers favored male athletes by four to one (Jones, 2013, p. 244). The study analyzed sport and athlete coverage of the 2008 games across four major television stations’ websites, in which a total of 1720 stories and 1960 photographs were published. The results showed that the majority of stories in 2008 concerned male athletes, with twice as many lead stories being taken up by men. Photographs featured men 1.6 times more than women as well. These results show the inequality of sports and athlete coverage regarding male and female sports. The television stations’ published content is a reflection of the “the public wants to see,” which also begs the question of why? It is clear media framing is playing a role in the way that male sports are favored and prioritized, while the reasons are slightly more vague. I believe this research also supports the hypothesis that societal norms play a role in the continuation of the unequal representation of women and men in sports.

Following the categorical analysis of Jones’ research, “Television Sports and Athlete Sex: Looking At The Differences in Watching Male and Female Athletes,” by Angelinin, also analyzes the television medium. However, this research analyzes specifically the different ways sports commentators speak about female athletes in comparison to male, and how this dialogue affects how men and women physiologically and cognitively process sports messages. This study involved men and women watching 24, 30-second clips from major sports networks and analyzed the arousal and engagement following watching these clips (Angelini, 2008, p. 21). The results showed sports with male athletes receive the highest arousal ratings, which is expected to be why television stations favor their programming for viewers. The arousal rates and favoritism of male dominated programming once again reinforces the idea that as the viewers in society, we favor male sport, which I believe is once again a product of the social dominance of men in society and the norms associated with this culture.

Another study that specifically addresses the differences in television reporting is, “Differences in Television Sports Reporting of Men’s and Women’s Athletics: ESPN SportsCenter and CNN Sports Tonight,” by Tuggle. This study examines the coverage given to women’s athletics by two national, nightly sports programs: ESPN SportsCenter and CNN Sports Tonight. The study consisted of of collecting a sample of sportscasts from the two cable shows, recorded during a four week period, during a time where the U.S. Open Tennis Championships were expected to report on the sport with enough coverage for male and female athletes. Results showed that the two programs devoted only about 5% of air time to women’s sports, with specific story placement and on-camera commentary also favoring male athletes (Tuggle, 1997, p. 14). This research shows, once again, a direct correlation between television air-time and coverage and the gender of sports and athletes. Tuggle specifically links this to the prominence of production value favoring male sports in television, concluding that we have “not reached gender equality in sports coverage” (Tuggle, 1997, p. 21). Like the research of Jones and Angelini, it is shown that televisions is playing a role in the implementation of gender inequality in the media, further perpetuating the societal norms and constructs that male sports are more important and of higher value.

Title IX also presents a different category in which,“How Campus Media Cover Sports: The Gender-Equity Issue, One Generation Later,” by Huffman, Tuggle, Rosengard, addresses whether or not the incorporation of Title IX in colleges has led to equal coverage of men’s and women’s athletics by campus media. In a study of 442 print and broadcast stories from collegiate newspapers and television stations, the stories were analyzed by number, length, type of story, and the gender of the reporters and athletes (Huffman, 2004, p.481). As well as, the gender of those interviewed in television clips, the running time of sound bites, and the job descriptions in those clips. This resulted in 773 items to compare for gender inequalities. In regards to seeing a correlation of Title IX leading to equal coverage of athletic coverage, the answer is no (Huffman, 2004, p.475). While the overall time devoted to male newspaper stories than female stories was equivalent given the discrepancy in the number of stories men to women, the overall television coverage devoted 81.5% of time to male athletes. Overall, research shows that while Title IX is supposed to mandate the equality of men’s and women’s athletics at colleges receiving federal funding, the journalists have the power in how and what they report. Once again, this study reflects the norm of favoring male athletics over female in the media, with the collegiate media mirroring national media’s favoritism.

Lastly, to incorporate another perspective into my research I looked at the category of female sports journalism once more. But this time in regards to the New Zealand based research in, “Female Journalists Shun Sports Reporting: Lack of Opportunity or Lack of Attractiveness,” by Strong. This study provides evidence that journalism is still a male domain, and New Zealand has not reached gender equality in this regard, even though it remains, historically, a world leader in opportunities for women. This study involved a survey asking questions regarding the sports journalism field to female reporters, to try and break down why they believe sports journalism is still a male-dominated field in New Zealand. With respondents from 11 different news outlets, the results reflected about 28% of New Zealand newspaper publications (Strong, 2007, p.12). In regards to experience, 36% of females said they had never covered a sports story, 50% have covered some sports stories, while only 14% have been or were currently sports reporters (Strong, 2007, p.12). When asked a series of open-ended questions, results were that women felt qualified but “not motivated” or encourages to pursue jobs in the sports department (Strong, 2007, p.13). Overall, there was a general consensus among the women, that they were not averse to working in the sports department but there was a negative association with it and it was considered a male dominant department. This research shows that the inequality of gender in sports journalism is not specific to the United States, it is a global phenomena. While New Zealand’s history differs in the equality of women, there is evidence that norms are set in place affecting the culture of sports journalism, leading women to feel that it is a male dominated field.

By analyzing articles that explore: the inequality in sports journalism workplaces, sports commentator framing, male hegemony in sports journalism education, gender-based expectations in sport broadcasters, bias in sports airtime and coverage nationally and collegiately, as well how televised sports are perceived differently by viewers I was able to gain the necessary knowledge and background information to solidify my research. This information and analysis also allowed me to successfully address my research question of whether or not societal norms play a role in the inequality sports journalism and coverage, helping prompt and further my research process.

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