

SPORTS JOURNALISTS ON COVERING WOMEN'S SPORTS: METAJOURNALISTIC
DISCOURSE ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SPORTS AND SPORTS REPORTING

by

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Abstract

Despite a growing field of women's sports, women's sports still are far less frequently covered in sports journalism. (Bruce et al. 2010). Furthering the invisibility of women's sporting is the relatively small number of journalists who focus on women's sports and are willing to enter into discourse on the topic. The present study seeks out metajournalistic discourse on women's sporting through longform interviews with sports journalists (N=10), about how they conceive of their role and how they conceive of the current state of women's sports coverage in the journalistic field. Participants largely saw themselves as a voice for the voiceless women in sports, yet they held out hope that changes in newsroom demographics and the development of digital news technologies could improve coverage of women's sports.

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Introduction

In the forty years since Title IX passed through Congress and prohibited discrimination based on sex in federally funded education programs, the number of females participating in sports in general has increased significantly. In 2014 the number of female, college athletes was at an all-time high, with over 200,000 participants (Acosta and Carpenter, 2014). With the number of women playing sports on the rise, one would assume media representation of female athletes would also proportionately rise. However, the number of news stories published on female athletes still remains significantly lower than those published on their male counterparts with very little change since the 1970s. For example, in 2010 a study on news coverage of female athletes in New Zealand found that 10% of print news sports stories and 5% of television news sports stories were about women (Bruce et al. 2010).

The goal of this paper is to further the metajournalistic discourse on the reporting of women in the sports media landscape. Through this research, we hope to open the conversation and consider why reporting on female athletes has not become simultaneously more commonplace with the rise of female participation in sports. We will first consider the importance of metajournalism in order to frame our research with current sports journalists. We will then discuss the current state of gender in the media landscape as well as other problems in sports reporting to use as a lens when presenting our research. Finally, we will specifically ask a number of digital sports journalists about their experiences in the sports journalism field. Through our interviews with current sports journalists, we hope to find out why they are or are not reporting on women's sports and what the journalists think it will take in order to reach a more equal state of coverage. By choosing interviews with current

sports journalists as our research method, we are furthering the metajournalistic discourse on sports journalism, particularly when it comes to the influence that gender plays in the media. The participants are participating in news media self-criticism (Haas, 2006) in this research by considering the ways in which they report on sports and their role perception as sports journalists. With the rise of digital journalism in recent years, the space for reporting on female athletes is unlimited, giving sports journalists endless opportunities to cover women's sports. This paper hopes to understand why journalists have not yet taken advantage of that space on a large scale.

Theoretical Framework: Metajournalistic Discourse

It is first important to have a clear concept of the term “metajournalistic discourse” in order to fully understand the impact of the research outlined in this paper. In simple terms, Carlson (2016) defines metajournalism as “public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception” (p. 15). Carlson argues that in order to understand metajournalistic discourse, one must come to the realization that journalism is not a static field and that news is influenced by many different cultural and societal factors. He says that metajournalistic discourse allows for journalists and non-journalists alike to have a theoretical framework to see news at a microlevel and interpret it on a macrolevel (2016).

Within the broad umbrella of metajournalism, Carlson argues for the existence of three main factors which come into play: “actors, sites/audiences, and topics” (2016, p. 355). Actors refers to the fact that within metajournalism, the creators could be journalists or non-journalists. Carlson argues that including non-journalists in metajournalism is important because their feedback could help journalists further understand how “journalistic work

intermeshes with other actors” (2016, p. 356). Carlson explains that acknowledging the site/audience of where and how metajournalism is created is important because it shows the ways in which the actor reaches the public, which could help clarify the conditions under which the metajournalistic discourse was created (2016). Finally, Carlson differentiates between two different metajournalism topics: reactive discourse and generative discourse. Reactive discourse is journalism which responds to a specific event or issue within the reporting process of a specific topic. Generative discourse, for example, the Pew Research Center’s State of the News Media, tries to “spark wider conversation about journalism” (Carlson, 2016, p. 358). This paper will fall under the topic of generative metajournalistic discourse.

In his call for future research on metajournalistic discourse, Haas goes beyond Carlson’s broad definition of the topic and identifies three specific types of metajournalism: “‘news media reporting,’ ‘news media criticism,’ and ‘news media self-criticism’” (2006, p. 350). Haas says there has been significant research already on news media reporting and news media criticism, but there has not been enough research on news media self-criticism, which he defines as journalists themselves reflecting on their own news practices rather than the state of news media as a whole (2006). News media self-criticism may not be as prominent as news media reporting and news media criticism, but with the rise of more and more opportunities for discussion as a result of the popularity of the internet, Haas argues for a deeper look into news media self-criticism (2006).

Meltzer, Goode, and Ferrucci and Taylor express the importance of metajournalistic discourse, no matter the form, in their research. Meltzer argues that when journalists are participating in journalistic discourse, they are partaking in a community of practice (2017).

Meltzer uses Wenger's definition of "community of practice," which states that communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (qtd. in Meltzer, 2017, p. 41). By partaking in a community of practice, journalists participating in metajournalistic discourse have a duty to be constantly shaping their media landscape as the world changes. This falls in line with Goode's argument that metajournalistic discourse is a branch of citizen journalism and can help to further democracy (2009). Goode's concept of metajournalism encompasses Carlson's non-journalist actors and Haas' news media criticism; however, the idea that metajournalistic discourse is paramount to the success of journalism remains all the same.

Finally, Ferrucci and Taylor lay out specific examples in which metajournalism proved important in making progress in a specific field of journalism. Through a metajournalistic research project, Ferrucci and Taylor found major discrepancies between the existing literature on the definition and means of gaining access in the photojournalism field and what photojournalists actually experience (2018). They analyzed interviews on the photojournalism blog *The Image, Deconstructed*. From the interviews, they were able to discover "how leaders within the photojournalism industry socially construct the definitions of access and how they describe the associated practices (Ferrucci and Taylor, 2018, p. 42). This specific example of metajournalistic discourse shows how metajournalism can influence the ways which reporters and citizens alike think about journalism and how metajournalism coincides with the fluid nature of our media landscape.

Sports Reporting and Gender

Perhaps the most persistent issue in sports reporting is the lack of diversity, which can be separated into two main categories: racial diversity, and gender diversity. Similar to the

representation of women within mainstream media, the lack of racial diversity within sports media stems from the lack of racial diversity on the sports desk. Hardin and Whiteside (2006) found that the percentage of racial minorities working within the sports reporting field is significantly lower than the percentage of white reporters, with minorities making up only 12% of full-time employees in the sports department. Additionally, within the sports departments, racial minorities were far less likely to hold supervisor or managerial positions. Out of all of the newspapers which Hardin and Whiteside (2006) surveyed, “most minorities, 53%, were employed as reporters” (p. 46) and only “10% of the minorities employed were supervisors” (p. 46). Hardin and Whiteside (2006) argued that the underrepresentation of racial minorities in sports departments showcases the fact that sports journalism has yet to find a way to promote diversity.

Mastro, Seate, Blecha, and Gallegos (2012) further expound on Hardin and Whiteside’s proposition by evaluating the role that race plays in the perceptions of expertise, contribution, character, and likeability of sports reporters. They found that overall, white, male reporters were seen as the most reliable and likeable sources¹ no matter what the sport

¹ In her book *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*, Valian (1999) explains that many people and employers unknowingly perceive men as a superior choice for a task or job due to the inherent gender schemas that everyone grows up with. Valian defines gender schemas as “a set of implicit, or nonconscious, hypotheses about sex differences plays a central role in shaping men's and women's professional lives” (p. 2). She states that even if a man and a woman have equal qualifications, these gender schemas often lead employers to “overestimate the male’s qualifications and underestimate the females.”

in question was. However, in most cases, the gender of the reporter seemed to matter more than their race in determining their credibility to report on a specific sport. In his research, Price (2012) argued that the lack of diversity in the sports newsroom was a sign of institutional racism within sports media. For example, Price (2012) stated that “despite the high number of black athletes, there is not a single BME [black or minority ethnic] member of the British Athletics Writers Association” (p. 83). Additionally, Price cites the many instances in which the news content itself sets athletes apart by race when describing BME athletes as physically superior to white athletes. This stereotypical coverage of BME athletes is allowed to continue in part because of the lack of diversity within the newsroom itself, lending itself to a never-ending cycle of racism (Price, 2012).

The second and perhaps more prominent issue within the world of sports reporting is the underrepresentation of women. This lack of gender diversity is manifest in multiple ways: a lack of female reporters, a small percentage of stories on female athletes, and stereotyped coverage in the stories that are published on female athletes. Hardin and Whiteside (2006) found that women make up only 11% of full-time employees within the sports departments of many newspapers, and 30% of newspapers surveyed don't have any full-time women employees within the sports department. The absence of women reporting on sports leads to Godoy-Pressland's findings on the number of stories written on female athletes versus their male counterparts. Godoy-Pressland (2014) examined five British newspapers from January 2008 to December 2009 in order to discern the difference between everyday coverage of female athletes and coverage of female athletes during a major sporting event, in this case the 2008 Olympic Summer Games. She argued that all previous research has only focused on a specific time frame around a major sporting event like the Olympics, which provided skewed

results of what sports coverage really looks like on a daily basis (Godoy-Pressland, 2014). Out of the 22,954 articles which the researcher analyzed, only 3.6% of those articles pertained to female athletes, which Godoy-Pressland (2014) said “challenges previous research which suggests this figure is much higher” (p. 603).

In a second study, Godoy-Pressland (2016) evaluated the content of the stories written on female athletes. She found that through the language of the media, female athletes’ bodies are often trivialized, seen as secondary, commercialized, or only praised for their femininity. In all of these cases, the little content that is being produced on female athletes often takes the gaze away from the athletic ability of the athlete and places it more often on her appearance (Godoy-Pressland, 2016). Ultimately, Godoy-Pressland argues that this view on female athletes’ bodies aims “to maintain the status quo of male hegemony in sport” (2016, p. 755).

Gender in Journalism

Feminist media scholars have been studying the presence of women within the newsroom and the representation of women within the news itself for years. Research has shown that the rise of the number of women journalists should bring about a rise in women in the news itself (GMMP, 2010; Len-Rios, Rodgers, Thorson, and Yoon, 2005; Van Zoonen, 2002); however, the most recent findings from the Global Media Monitoring Project exhibit the growth in both cases to be steady but very slow. Initially, the research expressed a positive outlook on the future of gender representation in both the newsroom and the news itself. Van Zoonen (2002) acknowledged the disparity between men and women in the newsroom and argued that the disparity was due to the inability for women to rise in the hierarchy in the journalism industry. As a result, Van Zoonen argued that “because the news

is made by men, it is thought to reflect the interests and values of men too” (34). However, Van Zoonen went on to argue that despite the current disparity at the time, the genre of news was changing, and this change would benefit women in journalism.

Van Zoonen argued that due to cultural standards of femininity, female journalists are better suited for human interest stories because they strive for emotional involvement with the audience. The demand for human interest and entertainment type stories has increased, which opens up a new market for female journalists (Van Zoonen, 2002), thus increasing the potential for more media coverage of women, seeing as, historically, women are more likely to report on women (GMMP, 2015). Van Zoonen (2002) goes as far to say that this transition from hard news to softer human interest stories could “transform the field from a male dominated domain into an area that has the potential of becoming dominated by women” (p. 45).

However, since Van Zoonen’s initial research, results from the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) as well as other individual research projects have shown that women still remain significantly underrepresented both in the newsroom and in the news itself. Len-Rios et al. (2005) completed a study in which they performed a content analysis of two newspapers (one medium and one large) to discern the media representation of women among the stories. They then compared the results from the content analysis to the perceptions of both male and female journalists. Out of the 4,851 individuals in the news stories whom the researchers coded in their analysis, “79% (N = 3,825) were males and 18% (N = 897) were females” (Len-Rios et al., 2005, p. 160); the stories which included women were often in stereotypically female sections of the news such as entertainment and almost never sports. Additionally, out of the reporters whom the researchers surveyed, the female

reporters' perceptions of the state of gender representation within the news was more accurate than the males' (Len-Rios et al., 2005).

Both the 2010 and 2015 GMMP reports support Len-Rios et al.'s findings, thus furthering the idea that in the news, "men's views and voices are privileged over women's" (Ross and Carter 2011, p. 1148). The GMMP is a longitudinal study which looks at the representation of women within media throughout different countries on one specific day (Ross and Carter, 2011). The 2010 report, which is the fourth published report since the inaugural research in 1995, found that the increase in media representation of women is so slow that "it will take at least 43 years, slightly less than half a century, to achieve gender parity in mainstream news" (qtd. in Ross and Carter, 2011, p. 1151). The most recent report, which was published in 2015, stated that since 2010, the growth had all but stopped (GMMP, 2015). In fact, the percentage of women in stories on politics has gone down since 2010. Even with the boom of the digital news market, women still remain almost invisible, with women making up 26% of subjects of online news stories and "news media Tweets combined" (GMMP, 2015, p. 3). While the findings from these studies cover the representation, or lack thereof, of women in the broad sense of the media landscape, significant research has shown even more drastic results when it comes to sports journalism (Godoy-Pressland, 2014). This paper hopes to expand upon those findings.

Method

Carlson (2016) defines journalism as "a practice capable of supplying valid knowledge of events in the world" (p. 350). In order for Carlson's concept of journalism to be possible, journalists must interpret the world which they live in and determine their role as journalists within this world. Metajournalistic discourse arises out of the journalists'

interpretation and reflection of their roles. It asks how “utterances about journalism shape news practices” and seeks to connect those utterances to the “creation and circulation of journalism’s sociocultural meanings to the social practices surrounding news production and consumption.” Thus, metajournalistic discourse in essence has two different functions: it provides meaning of journalism within the journalistic community as well as providing a definition of journalism for the broader public. Metajournalistic discourse goes beyond just addressing journalism itself but it brings light to the way that readers experience the journalism itself, positively or negatively (De Maeyer & Holton, 2015).

Metajournalistic discourse often includes discussion of various journalistic theories, such as: frameworks of interpretive community, paradigm repair, boundary work and collective memory. Journalists in many cases use metajournalistic discourse to discuss what needs to be done in order to protect their paradigms and monitor the different boundaries of journalism, or to decide what should be defined as journalism and what should not. This discourse and this work are important because by defining what constitutes true journalism and what constitutes a true journalist, journalists are legitimizing their field of practice and increasing their authority within an ever-growing media landscape.

“Definition making and boundary work” (Carlson, 2016, p. 360) is key to establishing the validity of a news story. This is important because in order for a story to be deemed valid by the readership, the audience must consider the news in general to be a legitimate source. Carlson argues that the individual story is inescapable from the larger news landscape which it is a part of (p. 364), and thus, the entire news landscape must be seen as legitimate for readers to value the individual story. An example of the use of boundaries to determine legitimacy of news can be found in news coverage of the 2016 American Presidential

Election. In news coverage of the election, Trump and his supporters often did not have the same legitimacy as other sources because the media did not include them within their determined boundary of legitimacy. As a result, within journalism, the news media labeled Trump and his supporters as deviants (McDevitt & Ferrucci, 2018). In the process of defining these boundaries and thus metajournalistically defining journalism itself, journalists tend to reward other journalists who define their work according to “the stability of the past” (Carlson, 2014, p. 44). Journalists who do not conform to existing understandings that journalists have defined as key to their practice, are often identified as “scapegoats” by other journalists and must take due criticism that comes with breaking out from tradition (Carlson, 2014, p. 45).

Keeping these concepts in mind, it is clear that looking at how journalists perceive the lack of diversity in the coverage of sports can provide significant insight into both journalists’ perspective on niche coverage as well as provide perspective of patterns of coverage for journalism overall.

Previous research has shown that there is a very small amount of metajournalistic discourse conducted by female sports journalists on their experiences within the sports media field. The few exceptions would be: Moskovitz, 26 December 2017; Bruton, 29 August 2018; and Warren, 6 December 2017. The significant lack of female sports journalists within the sports media landscape in general is a contributing factor to the small number of female sports journalists willing to speak about their experience. This study aimed to bring light to this issue and attempted to inspire more metajournalistic discourse on the topic of gender diversity and equity within sports reporting. The research in the present study consists of analysis taken from 10 longform interviews with sports journalists who cover or have

covered women's sports. The journalists were assured anonymity in their interviews so that they could speak freely about their experiences within the sports media field.

Phone interviews were chosen as the primary research method for a few reasons. Most pressingly, phone interviews were chosen because of the lack of previously published content on metajournalistic discourse when it comes to women's sports, save Moskovitz, Bruton, and Warren's writings. Additionally, phone interviews were chosen in order to give the "subjects a voice" in the research process (Yin, 2011). And finally, using interviews as a research method determined the research as metajournalistic discourse because the two researchers are journalists by training, meaning that the resulting study consists of journalists talking about journalism. Within interviewing, the subjects become the informers who teach the researchers and provide the perspective that the researchers do not have prior to completing the interviews (McCracken 1988; Weiss, 1994).

Within interviewing, there are three primary functions, which were considered when completing the following research: interpretation, summary, and integration (Weiss, 1994). Within interviews, the interviewees are able to provide personal stories and applications that cannot be gained from many other types of research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). The possibility of personal stories and applications allows for a much larger "wealth of detail" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011, p.139) than other research methods. Interviewing as a research method when it comes to journalism is particularly beneficent because it gives journalists a chance to explain and give understanding into their production process (Gans, 2004; Tuchman, 1978).

Thus, we have posed three research questions which we plan to address through the following research:

RQ 1: “How do sports journalists metajournalistically construct their role within sports journalism?”

RQ 2: “How do sports journalists metajournalistically construct the difference in coverage between men’s and women’s sports?”

RQ 3: “How do sports journalists metajournalistically construct the future of the sports journalism field?”

Journalistic Role Perception of Sports Journalism

In RQ 1, the question was posed “How do sports journalists metajournalistically construct their role within sports journalism?” Most sports journalists interviewed described their roles as contributors to the overall sports media landscape on the most basic level as a storyteller of specific sports, athletes, and teams. Within their roles, they said they are “always looking for good stories” (Participant A) to pitch so that editors will take their stories and “run with them” (Participant A). More specifically, they defined their idea of a good story as the story “that no one else has told yet” (Participant B) which requires creativity and significant work on the front end of the research and reporting process. Participants A, F, G and J all agreed that this hunt for the untold story is one of the reasons why they have ended up covering the female side of multiple different sports.

When it comes to telling the story of a specific sport, many journalists agreed that it takes more than just reporting on the scores of the game or factual information that readers could have gained by just watching the game on television (Participant B). “We’ve got to provide the story behind the game, behind the players, kind of the real meaning of why things are at work,” Participant B said. Journalists following specific beats went on to describe the

importance of telling the story of an entire sports league to their audience because the topic is so niche (Participant J). For example, Participant F said, “there’s so much history that people don’t know about” in the sport which they cover.

Furthermore, many journalists said that they are motivated to tell the untold story in order to remain relevant in the industry and not just one of many voices telling the same story (Participant B). Especially for freelance journalists, telling an uncommon story is important because they have to “think of something that a staff writer might not have already thought of” (Participant G). Additionally, journalists said they found a sense of satisfaction in covering topics that are not traditionally covered as frequently (Participant J).

For many of these sports journalists searching for the uncovered beat, the natural solution is to cover minor league or women’s sports just because there is so much availability for coverage. Participant F said they started a podcast about women’s soccer because they realized there were none previously available to the fanbase:

When I started it, I was very aware that there wasn’t any weekly, week-in, week-out women’s soccer podcast...I looked around on the Internet and could find a few, but nothing in the U.S.

For other journalists, covering women’s sports just came as part of the job because as a sports reporter, they said their duty is to “tell the stories of everyone who plays it” (Participant I).

Metajournalistic scope of differences in reporting sport between genders

In RQ 2, the question was posed “How do sports journalists metajournalistically construct the difference in coverage between men’s and women’s sports?” All journalists

interviewed agreed that there is a significant difference in the way in which the journalism community as a whole has approached journalism in men's versus women's sports thus far. The differences can be separated into two main categories: the quantity of women's sports journalism as compared to men's and the quality of women's sports journalism as compared to men's. Most journalists noted a few exceptions in these differences.

Across the board, all of the journalists agreed that "there is no doubt" (Participant A) that there is a larger audience for male sports than female sports, leading to more coverage, statistically. Participant H, who works as a fact checker for a major sports publication, said they could "count on one hand the number of women's sports stories that [they] have handled," and Participant A said there had been multiple times when they were "dissuaded from trying to cover women's sports." The little coverage that women's sports do receive oftentimes feels like a cliched "check of a box" so that news publications can say that they covered women's sports, Participant F said. Participant E argued that "in every way possible, gender plays, it seems to me, a creditably determinative role in how many, many people in our industry make choices about what to cover and how much."

In addition to the many journalists' perceptions of a lack of coverage of women's sports, many of the journalists argued that the coverage that women's sports do get is of a lower and different type of quality. In metajournalistic terms, there does not seem to be a clear definition of what women's sports journalism should look like. One journalist compared the coverage of women's sports to the coverage of Olympic sports, where everything is broadcasted as a "personality story" or a "soap opera" (Participant A). According to many of the journalists, there is a lack of serious, "critical" coverage of women's sports (Participant C). The coverage that does exist of different women's sports

leagues seems to be afraid to criticize the players due to a dichotomy which Participants F and J explained. Participant F gave this example:

Say you were the player who missed a penalty kick in the 95th minute, and your team lost because of it. [The PR reps] wouldn't want that player to talk to the press. Now think about that. Think about that in the context of the Super Bowl or the World Series of any men's game. That would be the person that everyone would want to talk to.

Instead, Participant J said some journalists are not willing to write critically or treat the women as professional athletes because the writers and the fans "become very protective."

In some cases, journalists argued that the different quality and type of attention paid to women's sports has to do with many journalists' work which has "marketed women's sports as a cause" (Participant A). Participant C explained that journalists have to "speak to the fans," but they cannot "walk among the fans." This view of women's sports journalism as a cause has led to people writing about female athletes only in a sense that appeals to the inspiration of young girls or reporting which says "'isn't this amazing what they're doing,' as opposed to true sports coverage" (Participant F). It becomes advocacy journalism, which Participant G argues should not be a part of women's sports journalism if female athletes want to be treated as similar to men.

However, the journalists did note a few exceptions in these differences in reporting between genders. For example, in covering women's tennis, Participant A said the reporters writing about the sport are really just "writing about tennis; it just happens to be played by women." This attitude is similar in Olympic gymnastics and figure skating coverage,

Participant A said. Additionally, women's soccer in the United States might be "one of the first to push through" (Participant G) because of soccer fans' interest in all aspects of the game and the success of the United States National Women's Team (Participants D and G). In all of the exceptions which the journalists listed, their positive coverage in terms of quantity and quality is due primarily to the extraordinary success of the female athletes (Participants A, D, G, H, and J).

The journalists came up with a variety of reasons for why they perceived the current state of women's sports coverage as less than that of the athletes' male counterparts. However, when it came down to it, the main difference is the smaller audience, which leads to the "chicken and the egg" question that Participant H asked. "Are you not covering women's sports because you say there is no audience? Or is there no audience because you're not putting it in front of them?" (Participant H). The supply and demand rationale that many journalists said is prevalent in the industry stems from a decrease in the overall demand for journalism (Participant J), as well as a decrease in the amount of money in the industry (Participant G).

In the broadest sense, with the die-out of print journalism and advertising as a whole, the amount of sports journalism has significantly decreased in recent years, according to Participant E. And the result of the decrease of sports coverage in general is compounded in niche sports coverage like in women's sports, or really any other sport than baseball, basketball, or football (Participant J). For example, in conversations with other journalists, Participant F said they have found that for every "complaint that there is not enough soccer coverage," there are "20 times the complaints" that there is not enough NFL coverage. At this point, sports journalists' main concern is just keeping up with the historically mainstream

sports coverage, or “what’s already been done” (Participant E), which makes it extremely difficult for journalists to attempt to report on anything new.

Furthermore, whether it is print or online, the success of journalism in the eyes of many companies is driven by revenue (Participant A), and if some publications do not see women’s sports coverage bringing in revenue, then they do not pitch women’s sports stories as frequently (Participant G). With so many ways to find news for free online, many journalists do not have the “time and the financial stability” to produce news for a smaller market like women’s sports (Participant A). The success of a story becomes a direct correlation to the number of clicks that it gets, and “if you are deciding to write an online story, you’re going to get more clicks on your NFL story than your women’s soccer story” (Participant C).

One of the other key factors which Participants D and E suggested as a reason for the lack in overall coverage of women’s sports as compared to men is the absence of women in the newsrooms doing the reporting:

We have a business that disproportionately involves decisions being made by men, typically older men. So, it is of no surprise that with fewer women in the newsroom, you see those decisions are disproportionately made to cover men.

Also, the fact that women are not, let’s say, haven’t reached critical mass within the industry means even when women are part of that decision-making process, much of the time they are reluctant to weigh in on behalf of covering women’s sports because of concern of professional blowback, as well. (Participant E).

Participant E argues that this is a form of “institutional sexism”² which has a “demonstrable effect on the ability” of women’s sports leagues to “generate a similar amount of revenue” to the men’s leagues. Additionally, Participant D believes that the “disconnect between who is doing the coverage” which Participant E explained, leads to a “self-fulfilling prophecy.” However, unlike Participant E, Participant D said they believe that diversity among genders in the newsroom is getting better.

Finally, the last factor which some of the journalists argued plays a role in coverage differences between men’s and women’s sports is the overall “youth” (Participant A) of women’s sports as a whole. For example, Participant I explained that in the WNBA, fans do not know as much about the league and have not built up a tradition of following of one specific team because the league has only been around for 22 years as opposed to the NBA, which has existed for over 70 years. Also, when it comes to commentating, there are less experienced commentators in a league like the National Women’s Soccer League, which only just finished its 6th year, than in Major League Soccer (the top-tier, male soccer league in the United States), which has existed for over 20 years (Participant A). These journalists said that with time, as the women’s leagues grow, they will hopefully gain the history and fan

² Sedlacek et al. define sexism as “reluctance to view both men and women outside the context of their traditional sex roles” and argue that sexism falls under the larger umbrella of racism (1976, p. 121). Taking this line of thought, institutional sexism would fall under the larger umbrella of institutional racism, which Sedlacek et al. define as “the action taken by a social system or institution which results in negative outcomes for members of a certain group or groups” (1976, p. 125).

base which will lead to more coverage.

Journalists' suggestions for growth

In RQ 3, the question was posed “How do sports journalists metajournalistically construct the future of the sports journalism field?” Journalists suggested there was an “utter need” (Participant J) for sports journalists to take the sport seriously and “cover women’s sports as if they are just as important as any other sport” (Participant B). This entails a “gender-blind” approach to sports coverage, which Participant E explained as assigning the “same level of coverage” to a professional athlete from a men’s team as you would to a professional athlete of the same position on a women’s team. Participant E’s gender-blind approach would allow for the professional criticism which multiple of the journalists noted as integral to serious, sports journalism coverage (Participants B and J).

This change of mindset when it comes to reporting on female athletes would require athletes and fans alike to understand that critiquing specific aspects of their play in a story is “actually a compliment to them” (Participant B). Looking at women’s sports journalism with “a critical eye” (Participant J) and making a specific effort to thoroughly “analyze the sport, just as they would in NFL games” (Participant A) increases the journalistic credibility of women’s sports journalism. Furthermore, it helps the sport build up an audience because the fans respect the seriousness of the coverage (Participant E). Once fans and journalists have made a “buy-in that is permanent” (Participant E), sports journalists can begin to build an infrastructure “of following women’s sports across sports” (Participant E). Participant E believes that the overlap of women’s sports coverage across different sports is important because outlets like SportsCenter only provide adequate cross-sport coverage for men’s sports. The key, Participant E argues, is to find one location where a fan can go to access

women's sports news in multiple different sports.

A smaller but still prevalent opinion on a way to improve upon women's sports journalism among the journalists is to increase gender diversity within the newsroom.

Participant D explained:

If these young women are growing up watching all-female broadcast groups, and watching these women host sports news shows, and when they click on an article and see a female by-line, I'm hoping that this is what affects the change.

Journalists also suggested that digital technologies could help facilitate change in the field.

The journalists interviewed in this research agreed that there are significant pros and cons to the rise in online and digital forms of journalism in regards to figuring out how to increase the quantity and quality of women's sports reporting. Overall, they agreed that online journalism has "democratized" (Participants A, E, and J) the industry, allowing more people to have a voice;³ whether or not this is a positive or a negative is still a significant

³ In their article "Journalism between de-professionalisation and democratization," Splichal and Dahlgren discuss what they believe to be some of the pros and cons of the rise in online journalism. In their article, they state that with the rise of the Internet, there has been a rise in new and more ways to participate in journalism. They say that this allows for more people to partake in journalism and for "more participatory communication by people who are not professional journalists" (2016, p. 7).

question. However, despite the drawbacks in online journalism in the sports industry, half of the participants felt like it produces a “net positive” (Participant B) due to the increase in space for writing on niche subjects (Participants B, D, E, F, and H). The other half of participants were unable to come to a clear stance on whether the benefits outweigh the costs.

The major flaw in online journalism, which includes hard journalism and fan journalism according to Participant C, is that the line between hard journalism and fan journalism “is a very blurry line” (Participant C). In other words, there would need to be more boundary work done by journalists in order to clarify what would fall under hard, sports journalism and what would fall under fan commentary, and not real journalism. Additionally, with online journalism, there is far less of a standard that the journalist must go through in order to publish a story. Participant F explained that “anyone can publish without necessarily having gone through an editing process.” This allows for fans of the sport to “think they are a sports journalist” (Participant G) and create questionable content in terms of credibility. Furthermore, because anyone can create a blog and write a story, there is always “free content out there,” (Participant J), which makes it more difficult for reputable, online news sources to make a profit off of their work (Participant J). There is a considerably increased number of stories written; however, there is still not a “model that allows for nearly as many journalists to be employed as they were during the peak of print” (Participant E).

In contrast, despite a lack of paid positions and the potential for un-credible news as a result of journalism produced for the Internet, online journalism has provided opportunities for more people to break into the sports journalism industry and report on specific topics like women’s sports. For example, both Participant F and Participant H were able to gain valuable experience in sports reporting and add to the women’s sports media landscape because of

online journalism. “Digital journalism made it easy for me to have this website where I can post these articles and build a base,” Participant F said. “When the Houston Dash started in 2014, I had 700 Twitter followers. Within a year I had 2500.” Similarly, Participant H said, “I started up a website because I got tired of trying to find a way to get stories out there, so that is how I ended up with three years’ worth of soccer coverage.” Additionally, the “widening of media” (Participant F) has allowed for niche coverage of women’s sports that was not possible when space was limited to print news (Participant H). Participant B also argued that the democratization of journalism has allowed “more people to be able to hold the big media in check.”

Conclusion

This paper attempted to answer three questions pertaining to sports journalists’ metajournalistic conceptions surrounding the role of gender in the current status of the sports journalism field as well as predictions for the future of sports journalism.

Through ten phone interviews with various sports journalists, this research found that sports journalists feel a duty to add to sports media landscape and tell the stories behind different sporting events. For many of the journalists, this meant searching for the untold story in order to remain relevant amongst many different voices. For some of the journalists, telling the untold story led them to begin reporting on a traditionally less followed sports beat like a minor league team or a women’s team. On the other hand, some journalists felt that reporting on women’s sports was simply a result of their duty to cover the sport, no matter who is playing it.

Furthermore, this research also found that sports journalists have seen significant differences in the actual reporting of men’s versus women’s sports. The journalists separated

these differences into two different categories: the quantity of journalism produced on men's versus women's sports and the quality of journalism produced on men's versus women's sports. In regards to the quantity of journalism produced between men's and women's sports, journalists said that in most cases, news outlets run a considerably higher number of stories on men's sports than they do on women's sports. In regards to the quality of sports journalism, research found that the journalism produced about women's sports and women's teams is often produced with lower quality and with a different lens (Godoy-Pressland, 2016). This can be seen through many journalists' failure to report on women's sports in an equitable manner to men's sports in terms of the level of criticism of specific game play journalists are willing to give to a female team or athlete. The journalists cited multiple reasons for these differences between reporting on men's and women's teams including a sweeping decrease in journalism in general, the lack of audience and consequently revenue in women's sports, and the lack of female reporters in the sports newsroom.

The journalists suggested a change in mindset in order to begin to close the gap in the differences between reporting of men's versus women's sports. The new mindset suggested by the journalists would require others reporting on sports to approach covering a women's game in the exact same way that they would approach covering a men's game. Other journalists suggested that a call for more diversity in the newsroom would help to bring more diversity among the sports and teams covered. The research found that while online journalism seemed like a reasonable tactic to increase coverage and quality of reporting on women's sports, it comes with key flaws that cannot be ignored. The journalists agreed that while online journalism opens up the potential for more reporters to report on women's sports, it allows for a significant number of people to report on sports without being held to

specific newsroom standards.

This study furthers Godoy-Pressland's (2014) research which stated that less than 4% of sports journalism pertains to women's sports. The experiences of the participants interviewed for this research give examples from current news rooms of various types that reflect Godoy-Pressland's findings. This study shows the need for continued research similar to the research done by Acosta and Carpenter, Bruce and Scott-Chapman, Hardin and Whiteside, and Godoy-Pressland in order to further evaluate the nature of the sports media landscape. Additionally, this research shows that there is a significant need for a shift in the way that journalists themselves view the coverage of women's sports. While the continuation of research on the topic will continue to bring light to the lack in equitable sports coverage among genders, this research suggests that a shift in the way journalists view sports journalism is key for any change to happen.

This research emphasizes the importance of metajournalistic discourse and specifically, Haas's concept of news media self-criticism (2006). Each of the participants interviewed participated in news media self-criticism by considering the ways in which they report on sports and their perceptions of their roles as sports journalists. The research has shown that journalists have their opinions on the way that sports journalism should be done. However, the change that these journalists are calling for would not be possible for just one journalist to achieve on their own. Metajournalistic discourse is key in this instance in order to understand why and how journalists could impact coverage of women's sports.

What I have learned

Writing this thesis has been an overall positive experience. It was definitely stressful at times to arrange all of the interviews and make sure that I was keeping on track with the schedule that Dr. Perreault laid out for me, but in the end, the positives have outweighed the negatives. Once I was able to set all of the interviews with the various journalists up, I thoroughly enjoyed the interview process. Everyone that I spoke with was incredibly kind and willing to help with my research as well as great connections for potential future endeavors. Some of the journalists whom I interviewed are journalists whom I read or listen to regularly, and it was exciting to be able to speak on the phone with them, especially about a topic that I am passionate about.

I think another main takeaway from writing this thesis is that it is so important to do research on something that you are interested in. I cannot imagine working on a project that is as in depth as this one all semester long if I had not been naturally inclined to learn more about the subject. While I did not always want to do the interviews because I was stressed or had a busy day, I finished each one feeling so excited about what I was able to talk with the journalists about something that I was so interested in. I really do enjoy researching and writing research papers, which is something about myself that I have really come to learn through this project, and I found that researching something that I care about makes the experience all the better.

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