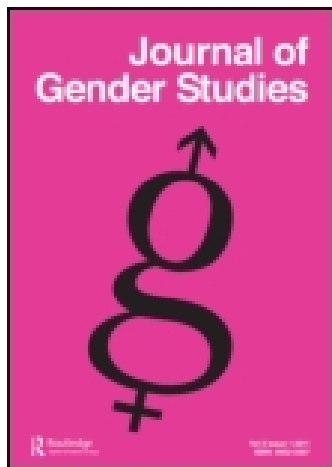


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FORUM

Women sportscasters: navigating a masculine domain

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Women sportscasters face considerable challenges when entering the male-dominated sports world. In the realm of sports culture, the ongoing competition among sports teams and athletes serves as a continual mechanism for constructing, validating and commemorating manliness. Sport is the nectar that nurtures the masculine self. It is a culture; the dominant culture in the United States where men rule and women are marginalized and objectified. This study reveals the barriers women encounter when they threaten the very arena in which men seek to get validation as males.

Keywords: sports; culture; women; sportscasting; hegemony; men

There has been substantial research examining the challenges that confront women in male-dominated workplaces (Dececchi *et al.* 1998, Pascall *et al.* 2000). There have been fewer studies of women who seek careers in domains that are not only male-dominated, but that also define masculinity for men. The focus for this study was the particular difficulties that women face as broadcasters in sport in the United States.

Nelson (1999) observed that ‘sports are a male initiation rite, as fundamental and natural as shaving and deep voices ...’ (p. 32). Male-dominated culture socializes young male children as to the role that sports play in determining and affirming their manhood as they ‘learn to associate sports prowess and sports privilege with masculinity’ (Nelson 1999, p. 32) and sports have traditionally served as a way for men to connect and bond with other males.

So what happens when women pursue careers such as sportscasting? The foundation for our study utilized qualitative research that relied primarily on personal interviews. Through multiple interviews, we integrated perspectives on the woman sportscaster’s career. Women presently employed in the sport broadcast industry were invited to participate through purposeful sampling (26 sportscasters took part). Thematic analysis was used to treat the information gathered (see Boyatzis 1998, p. 4). A thematic code was developed through inductive analysis (see Patton 1987) and patterns were sought within and among each of the interviewees’ responses (see Singletary 1994).

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Broadcast sports culture and the emergence of women sportscasters

Traditionally sport has been perceived as a specialization in which journalists must have particular credibility and knowledge. Research shows that preferred sportscasters are former athletes, or those perceived to have athletic traits (Allen 2003).

According to Black *et al.* (1998) there has been a slow emergence of women sportscasters who have faced many obstacles from colleagues, athletes and the sports audience. There have, however, been several female pioneers who helped to create paths for other women pursuing sportscasting careers. Mrs Harry Johnson is considered to be one of the earliest female sport journalists; in the late 1930s and early 1940s she worked as a sports commentator during her husband's broadcast for Central States Broadcasting in Omaha, Nebraska. Another notable was Jane Chastain who began her sports broadcasting career in the mid-1960s. Chastain worked for CBS, and she was the first woman to conduct a play-by-play of a live sporting event (Schwartz 1999). Lesley Visser became the first female NFL beat writer (a writer assigned to a specific sport) in 1974, first female Superbowl sideline reporter, and first female NFL broadcast analyst (Sobel 2001). Suzyn Waldman was the first radio beat reporter to cover the New York Yankees baseball and the New York Knicks basketball teams (Schwartz 1999).

The treatment of women sportscasters

According to Allen (2003) women sportscasters during the 1950s and 1960s, such as NBC's Pauline Frederick and Nancy Dickerson, were hired for reasons other than their knowledge of sports. Phyllis George, a former Miss America, was hired as a sportscaster in the mid-1970s (Schwartz 1999). According to George, despite her hard work, viewers positioned her as a sex symbol (Martze 2000). Jayne Kennedy, who also had little professional background, replaced George as the new anchor for the NFL's pre-game show. According to Schwartz (1999) neither was hired for her knowledge of football but to add a feminine touch to the male-dominated airwaves.

According to Martze (2000), Bob Wussler, vice-president of CBS Sports in the 1970s, paved the way for women in sports media when he realized that women made up a sizable portion of the viewing audience. Wussler hired Gayle Gardner, who became the first female sports anchor to cover games on a weekly basis for CBS.

Difficulties continued for most women sportscasters though. Jeannie Morris, who covered the Minnesota Vikings football game against the Chicago Bears in Minnesota during the early 1970s, was not permitted to work in the press box like male reporters but had to cover the NFL game outside the press box in a blizzard.

In the mid-1970s, Lesley Visser attempted to interview Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw and approached him to ask a question whereupon Bradshaw took her notepad, signed his autograph, and handed the notepad back to her (Sobel 2001).

Sports Illustrated (SI) publisher Time Incorporated filed a lawsuit against Major League Baseball (MLB) after SI's reporter, Melissa Ludtke, was prohibited by MLB's Commissioner, Bowie Kuhn, from interviewing players in the locker room during the 1977 World Series. In 1978, a 'US Federal Judge ruled that male and female reporters should have equal access to the locker room' (Druzin 2001, p. 1). The *Fort Myers News-press* sought equal access for locker-room interviews between the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers and their female reporter, Michele Himmelberg, but during the same NFL season, the Minnesota Vikings banned all reporters from the locker room because of the presence of one female. During the mid-1980s, the NFL, NHL, NBA and the MLB

'adopted policies in compliance with the US Court ruling on equal access' (Druzin 2001, p. 2).

Female sports reporters, however, were still facing obstacles and frustrations that their male counterparts did not encounter. For example, along with male journalists, Chicago Cub reporter Paola Boivin entered the St. Louis Cardinals Clubhouse to interview infielder Terry Pendleton after a 1987 game. One teammate asked Boivin: 'Are you here to interview somebody or to look at a bunch of guys *****?' (Druzin 2001, p. 1). One player's jockstrap was thrown toward Boivin and landed on her head. Similarly, the *Boston Herald's* reporter, Lisa Olson, recalls herself surrounded by New England Patriot players in a locker room after a 1990 game who 'made aggressive, vulgar comments' to her (Druzin 2001, p. 2). Olson's apartment was burglarized, she received death threats and her car tires were slashed (Druzin 2001). Both New York Knicks guard Charlie Ward and NFL defensive end Reggie White claimed that allowing female sports reporters into the locker room would be offensive to players' wives.

CBS's *60 Minutes* anchor, Andy Rooney expressed his views on women journalists reporting football games during *The Boomer Esiason Show* on the Madison Square Garden (MSG) network:

The only thing that really bugs me about television's coverage is those damn women they have down on the sidelines who do not know what the hell they are talking about. I mean, I am not a sexist person, but a woman has no business being down there trying to make some comment about a football game. (Gross 2002, p. 1)

Maintaining the hegemony – the present study

Ninety-three per cent of female journalists surveyed by Hernandez (1996) claimed that the obstacles or frustrations they encounter are not the same obstacles or frustrations that their male counterparts experience and this study pursued women's experience of these obstacles.

Women sportscasters stated that they felt pressure to maintain their appearance, constantly prove their credibility, confront inequitable treatment, work longer hours for promotions, and tolerate the network's informal policy of hiring 'beauty over intelligence'.

'They were just looking for a girl and they did not care who they hired as long it was a female'

Kristin Tallent made the above comment during the course of this study and several other participants made remarks to the effect that the looks of female sportscasters were perceived as a major concern by the networks and that image was a higher priority for female than for male sportscasters. For example, KXAN-TV's sports reporter Jen Ohlson indicated the unlikelihood that a woman who looked like Willard Scott (50 pounds overweight and bald) would be given an on-air position. A theme emerged that women were viewed as having a shorter shelf-life than men. KCNC-TV's sports reporter Marcia Neville, about to turn 50, pondered whether she would be replaced with a younger woman. This concern appeared in different guises throughout the research. Robin Adams recalled a close friend of hers working at the ABC affiliate in Buffalo who had not renewed her contract because viewers thought she was 'ugly'. Erica Morehouse remarked that her newsroom frequently received disparaging emails about the female talent's hairstyles and clothing. She had never seen similar emails about their male talent.

In June 2000, Lesley Visser (46 at the point of interview), announcer on ABC's Monday Night Football (MNF), was replaced by Melissa Stark (26) after Don Ohlmeyer took over as a new producer at MNF. Another ABC sports announcer, Donna de Varona, filed a \$50 million age and sex discrimination lawsuit against ABC. According to de Varona, if women are sidelined at a certain age, then the public will miss out on the experience that makes them more valuable than a younger, less seasoned sportscaster (Martze 2000).

'Knowledge is power in this business when you are a woman'

Another obstacle mentioned by female sportscasters (such as KAUZ-TV's Alanna Rizzo above) was the pressure to prove their sports knowledge. WREX-TV's sports reporter Jennifer Lada reported that she was often asked 'questions about the most obscure events as a sort of test of [her] worthiness as a sports anchor'. WTVG-TV's sports anchor, Katrina Hancock, stated that every time she moved to a different market, she had to start over to establish her credibility. Tallent affirmed this phenomenon:

[Y]ou have to prove yourself as a woman more than as a man. Getting through the actual barrier and getting people to believe that you know what you talking about can be hard sometimes as a woman.

Lada added that mistakes made by women would be more subject to scrutiny than those made by male counterparts. Both Rizzo and Lisa Byington made similar observations.

'Names like sweetie and honey'

Interviewees identified derogatory comments, sexual innuendo and hate mail as examples of the type of harassment they encountered in the industry. Nicole Manske stated that while reporting on the Indianapolis Colts Training Camp in Terre Haute, Indiana, a facility employee said: 'I wonder if she even knows what a quarterback is'.

Some respondents experienced discriminatory treatment by athletes. Morehouse stated: 'I was conducting an interview with a former NFL player and even though I was asking the questions, he was addressing the photographer with the answers'. Rizzo noted that male athletes made passes at female sportscasters which was not a problem encountered by male sportscasters. According to KOLD-TV's sports reporter Jerrey Libman, athletes frequently used terms such as 'sweetie or honey'.

'Well you must be sleeping with this guy and that is why you got this story'

Another barrier experienced by women sportscasters was the assumptions made about them when going about their work in a public setting (as exemplified by the remark made by Manske above). Peggy Kusinski said that if she had dinner with an athlete, coach or front office executive it would be read as a sexual encounter rather than business.

'Old boys club'

During our research, we also sought to determine what positions women were able to achieve in the sports broadcasting profession. We found that women sportscasters were predominantly seen as sideline reporters, anchors and sport program hosts. Mostly, women are not employed in positions such as play-by-play announcers, booth announcers or color

analysts and few women sportscasters have advanced toward General Manager, Sports Directors, or similar executive positions. According to Lesley Visser she has never been hired by a woman during her 30-year career. Collectively the interviewees suggested that male directors and managers did not consider women as likely candidates for promotion even when they had more experience than successful (male) job applicants. One interviewee referred to the 'old boys club'. WIVB-TV's sports reporter Robin Adams stated that she had applied for a job in Scranton, Pennsylvania and the news director had said that he would 'never put a woman on the air in sports ...'. According to Kusinski having more women in management and hiring positions is key to the problem.

Conclusion

Men have used sport to transform boys into men and affirm their masculinity. As spectators, society has approved these rituals. As sports journalism evolved, women sought careers as sports journalists and the challenges they encountered were perhaps more distinctive because they entered a domain which many have considered sacred for men.

Interviewees for this research cited various instances where women were hired for their looks rather than their sports knowledge. This objectification serves a vital function in the sports culture by reinforcing women's role in a male-dominated society and for men their cultural position.

Another impediment that men raised for women broadcasters came in the form of challenges to their knowledge base. We observed that female sportscasters may have to prove their credibility with information about sports in a way not expected of male sportscasters.

The harassment that women sportscasters experienced serves to remind them of their role in a male-dominated culture. Our participants related various experiences where fans, coaches, athletes, employers, colleagues and viewing audiences humiliated women sportscasters with derogatory comments, sexual innuendos and hate mail. Dovetailing with harassment is the perspective on gender in social settings. Participants revealed that interviews involving women sportscasters were often perceived as sexual encounters rather than professional ones. This attitude demeans women sportscasters while serving to maintain the status quo of sports culture.

As in other professions, women sportscasters encountered traditional barriers such as not being considered for promotion and being relegated to covering minor sports or lesser roles. According to a survey involving ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, Fox Sports Net, the new Fox Regional Sports Report, Turner, CNN/SI, USA Network, and HBO, 335 male and 81 female sportscasters are employed by the networks.

Despite these obstacles, women have made progress in sportscasting. Visser stated that women have gone from a half dozen opportunities for sportscasters in the 1980s to between 50 and 100 today (Martze 2000). ESPN was the first national network to hire women to its anchor positions and CNN followed in hiring Hannah Storm as its sports anchor. In addition to WNBA play-by-play duties, Robin Roberts has hosted *ABC's Wide World of Sports*, *ESPN SportsCenter*, and the men's World Cup (Martze 2000). Andrea Joyce and Bonnie Bernstein have, respectively, handled weekend host duties at NBC and CBS (Martze 2000).

However, women still have some distance to travel before parity can be achieved with their male colleagues (Bardon 2001). Although the number of women employed as sportscasters has increased, according to Martze (2000) women sportscasters have been mostly hired as reporters and analysts for low-profile sports.

More cynically, progress can be seen in the light of women being given roles that objectify them and place them where they do not threaten the status quo, and Wussler has stated that progress has not been rapid enough for true advancement to be asserted (Martze 2000).

For women to have equal opportunities as sportscasters, the sports culture needs to change. Boys and girls at a young age need to participate together in sports activities if we are to remove the traditional rituals for affirming masculinity. These changes to the sports culture rely on men seeking to define themselves not through their masculinity but as human beings which requires a wider cultural shift.

Notes on contributors

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