

## **Female Sportscasters: Still Battling the Same Barriers**

### **Abstract:**

Sports media has been a male dominated industry since its beginning. Over the years, women have been trying to break the barrier and cross over into sports reporting. Generalizations and stereotypes have categorized women into a group that has little knowledge of sports and is then questioned on its understanding of the sports industry. This warped perception of women in sports media can be attributed to the social identity theory, symbolic annihilation and a hegemonic masculine society.

### *Introduction:*

Sports media has been a male dominated industry since its beginning. Over the years, women have been trying to break the barrier and cross over into sports reporting. Generalizations and stereotypes have categorized women into a group that has little knowledge of sports and is then questioned on its understanding of the sports industry. This warped perception of women in sports media can be attributed to the social identity theory, symbolic annihilation and a hegemonic masculine society.

### *History:*

In today's society, we are no strangers to seeing female sports reporters conducting interviews who are granted access to the male locker rooms without any hesitation. In 1978, the U.S. District Court for Southern New York ruled that women should have equal rights and access to the locker room after an incident occurred with the female Sports Illustrated reporter Melissa Ludtke was denied access into the Yankees' clubhouse (Bell). In 1977, Time Inc., who is Ludtke's publisher, sued Major League Baseball for refusing to allow her to interview players in the locker room during the World Series (Clift, 2013). "I was 26 years old, and it was pretty heady stuff," Ludtke said. (Clift, 2013). However, it was not until 1985 that the policy was changed.

Sports was once believed to be strictly the ultimate man's world, and women trying to gain access to and coverage of the locker rooms of the major sports teams was one of the biggest and major battles in feminist history (Gunther, 2011). It was argued that female reporters in the locker room would violate the players' privacy and were accused of being voyeurs (Gunther, 2011). Betty Cuniberti, the first woman in the Dodgers press box, said, "I don't know a reporter, male or female, who likes to go in the locker room. It

is unsexy, smelly, sweaty and awful. Not really a place you would want to go, but it is part of the job, and it's where the stories are" (Clift, 2013). Women were often hired to fill the part of "hostesses", rather than actual reporters (Clift, 2013). However regardless of the position women held as reporters, even the most talented continued to be challenged because of their gender (Clift, 2013).

*Social Identity Theory:*

Women have long been viewed as a marginal group when it comes to sports casting, especially for male sporting events. They could be classified as the "out-group" while male sport reporters are the "in-group," while women are integrated more than they used to be, there is still much progress that could be made. They are perceived, thanks largely to the media, as inferior to males in this industry. When they are focused on, it is usually due to their looks, not their talent or potential. This view can influence the groups' perception of themselves, as well as the audiences' perception.

The Social Identity Theory, constructed by Henri Tajfel, proposes that these "in-groups" and "out-groups" are important for an individual's self-concept and that they "give (us) a sense of social identity: a sense of belonging to the social world" (McLeod, 2008). When women in sports media are made to feel that they are in the out-group, like they are so often, it makes it harder for them to break through the barriers of discrimination, which is why it is taking them so long to accomplish success in the sports casting industry. Not to say that women's careers in sports media are not flourishing more than they used to, simply it is harder for them in this male dominated industry and they are judged for other aspects of their career, not solely on their talent.

John C. Turner states in the Social Identification model that "individuals structure

their perception of themselves and others by means of abstract social categories, that they internalize these categories as aspects of their self-concepts, and that social-cognitive processes relating to these forms of self-conception produce group behavior” (1982). Once a certain group is perceived in a certain way, it is on its way to becoming a commonly held belief. This is how the different groups are formed, through cognitive processes. It is the cognitive processes that eventually develop the perceptions of different groups our society comes to discern. Society is more familiar and comfortable with the idea of male sport broadcasters, because that is the way the industry has been since the beginning. The women who do make it into the industry are more likely to be stereotyped.

When society’s perception of women in sports media becomes based upon stereotypes, it puts women into the “out-group.” The women are striving to gain respect, but it is hard to achieve with our hegemonic masculine society. They want and need to be in the “in-group” of sports media to break past these stereotypes.

Audience perceptions of female sports reporters are analyzed in an article written by Elizabeth Baiocchi (2009), where she too discusses stereotypes and their effects on female sports casters. Baiocchi talks about how little academic research there is on the subject of women’s “struggle to demonstrate their credibility as sports reporters” (2009). This is why it is an important matter to discuss. Adding to the credibility of the Social Identity Theory, Baiocchi states “when gender is salient, women will ascribe more credibility to other women, while men will perceive other men as more credible” (2009). In a time where gender is still salient, this is a big part of the reason that women are in the “out-group.”

### *Symbolic Annihilation*

Symbolic annihilation is the underrepresentation or lack of representation of a social group in the media based on their race, sex, sexual orientation or socio-economic status (Klein & Shiffman. 2009). Women have been symbolically annihilated in sports media since the early stages, and even now women make up only six percent of the sports reporting industry (Mastro, Seate, Blecha & Gallegos. 2012).

Aside from being vastly underrepresented, the images presented in the media make for a negative impact on female sports journalists. The Internet is filled with articles written by both men and women about the appearance and likability of female sports journalists, *10 All- Star Female Sports Reporters*, *40 Hottest Sports Reporters*, *The 60 Sexiest Female Sports Reporters of 2013* are just few of the many articles written highlighting the “sexiness” of the women. A female journalist, Jenna Haines writes:

Whoever said that sports journalism should be a man’s career was clearly blind.

Some of the most attractive and charming women in the country are filling up the sidelines with awesome commentary and interviews—though we are often too distracted to notice. (Haines. 2013)

The media is the biggest influencer of the public’s opinion, and by suggesting that female sports reporters are only valued for their appearance, viewers will begin to question the journalists’ knowledge and expertise.

In the 1970s, feminist scholars began using this concept of annihilation to express misrepresentation of women and girls in the media and how it affects their performance in the working world. According to Lisa P. Hebert, “(the media) are crucial in the construction and dissemination of gender ideologies, and thus, in gender socialization.”

The sports industry continuously annihilates women journalists by stereotyping and generalizing the entire group (Hardin & Shain.2005). The public is inadvertently taught to stereotype female sports reporters from the moment they step onto the screen. In a Twitter search for “female sports reporters” hundreds of posts can be found all discounting women in sports media:

@finlay\_krflive: “sky sports always pick the ugliest female reporters...”

@stellabritt: “Call me old-fashioned, but I can't stand female sports reporters”

@A\_Rebel\_Yell: “I can't stand female football announcers. Sideline reporters are fine, literally. Lady sports commentators make my blood boil”

@CourtBoggs:“I love sports more than the average girl. But I just don't fully support female sideline reporters.”

This sexist perception is most likely forged by the gatekeepers in the sports industry, which are predominantly white males that want to keep the traditional hegemonic male society and socially annihilate women from the world of sports reporting (Hardin & Shain. 2005).

### *Male Hegemony*

While the news world in general heavily contributes to our society's male hegemony, sports news in particular strictly fuels the value of male dominance. Males today are much more likely to exceed in the sports world, both with participation and reporting. This is due to an extensive history of favoritism towards men in the sporting industry. The Centre for Gender Equality in Iceland, published their funded research in 2006 that examines this well-known information.

Most of the European sports were developed to suit the male body above all, and

their standards have traditionally been set by men, even if many physical activities are just as well or even better suited for women than men (p.7).

Men set the bar, so to speak, when it comes to sports. As a result, the study suggests that media outlets are attempting to maintain audience rates by conforming to traditional beliefs and attitudes towards men and women in sports. Women sports are given less attention, as are women reporters.

When women reporters are given any amount of attention or interest, it rarely has anything to do with their ability to accurately report on sporting events. Google search “female sports reporters” and your webpage will flood with links to the “sexiest” or “hottest” female commentators. Women reporters are barely valued at all, but physical appearance should not be the primary aspect these women are recognized for. Anne Doyle, a former female on-air sports reporter, expresses her apprehensions for female commentators in her 2012 Forbes article, “It’s Time for Sports Broadcasting to Stop Relegating Women to Sideline Eye Candy.” Frustrated in particular with the way men crack sexual jokes at women in the sporting industry, Doyle says that women continue to face hurdle after hurdle in their decades long struggle to be taken seriously and considered equal to men for opportunities to cover sports. “Despite their increasing numbers, even the the [sic] most skilled, female sports broadcasters are usually limited to brief, sideline updates and interviews with coaches during games, while their innumerable male peers are on the air for hours . . . and hours” (Doyle, 2013, para. 11). It is our cultural male hegemony that in large is to blame for this, although over many years and lots of hard work put into the industry by female sportscasters the male hegemony mentality is not as strong as it once was, although still incredibly prevalent.

In the sports world this development thankfully has in part come from the aid of men. Ross Greenburg, former president of HBO sports, Jordan Schultz, a Huffington Post sports columnist, and James Andrew Miller, co-author of “Those Guys Have All the Fun: Inside the World of ESPN,”

We have all made great points on why it’s long past time to close the chapter on women sports reporters/entertainers as sideline eye candy and open the broadcast booth to the growing numbers of talented, skilled female commentators ready and itching for prime time (Doyle, 2013, para. 16).

Doyle believes in order to truly turn women’s luck around in this industry, more men like Greenburg, Schultz and Miller need to weigh in on this male hegemony issue and prove that women are not fighting this battle alone. Equal opportunity is a value all people need to strive for in order to rework this overwhelming male dominated mindset. Women commentators have made great strides, but not enough to overshadow the ongoing prejudice they face in the sporting world. Altering norms and values that are deeply encroached in our society is difficult, especially pertaining to hegemony, but not impossible.

### *The Glass Ceiling*

This concept of a glass ceiling is what makes efforts difficult and presumably impossible for female commentators in the sports industry. In their 1999 American Sociological Association paper, authors David Cotter, Joan Hermsen, Seth Ovardia and Reeve Vanneman studied the theories behind the glass ceiling concept. These college professors define the glass ceiling as “artificial barriers to the advancement of women and minorities.” These barriers reveal, “discrimination . . . a deep line of demarcation

between those who prosper and those left behind” (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, Vanneman, p. 2). In this particular focus of research, the glass ceiling prevents women from succeeding, regardless of their qualifications and/or achievements. This theory is not merely a claim about the existence of discrimination, but rather a focus on how discrimination increases as those victimized move higher up their social hierarchy. After climbing for so long, one is forced to realize that his/her potential to further succeed is evident, yet unattainable.

This glass ceiling is not constructed by nature, but rather by society. This is why it is possible to overcome; it is apparent all around us. Women commentators exist, yes, but just how much can they achieve? It was stated earlier by Doyle, that while female reporters are being given opportunities, but they are immeasurable to the opportunities given to their male counterparts. Females are given less airtime, less important reports and more grief and sexual attacks. To even classify female and male commentators as one in the same, in having the same job, is a major stretch. Authors Marie Hardin and Stacie Shain explain the vast differences between female and male reporters in their Newspaper Research Piece, “Female Sports Journalists: Are We There Yet? ‘No’.” The authors examine an informal survey of 50 high-circulation newspaper sports departments from 2001 that constituted that a mere 13% of clerk, copy editor and reporter occupations were held by women. Another, and more recent report shows that women hold only 11% of employment in sports departments. “No definite numbers exist on the number of women who work in sports media, although the Association for Women in Sports Media several years ago estimated it at 500” (Hardin, Shain, p. 1). That number seems unbelievably low, but this article was printed in 2005, which indicates that this

information was gathered at least ten years prior to our present date. Author Beth Shine, of the Women's Sports Magazine, is insisting on a qualified source to conduct an updated survey, but says that "female sports journalists, even in 2013 are still viewed as a rarity" (Shine, para.6). Shine refers to the sporting industry as a "boys club," which is why women lack respect and true opportunity. "Being a man rather than a woman does not gives [sic] you a greater innate knowledge of any sport . . . the idea that a woman would want to, or be qualified to write about sport is still unfathomable to some" (Shine, para.7). This idea is unfair and only strengthens the weight of the glass ceiling above female sports journalists. The weight can be lifted, but very little will change until the sporting industry sheds its image of this male dominated domain.

*Conclusion:*

Women in sports media have made great strides in recent years, although they still face discrimination daily in this predominantly male industry. The media makes an emphasis on the women's physical attributes and does not allow any leeway for women to showcase their knowledge and expertise. When the medium is the message, audiences, athletes and other sportscasters are going to continue to discriminate against female sports reporters.

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