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Where Are All the Women? Diversity, the Sports Media, and Sports Journalism Education

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Abstract: There is a shortage of female sports journalists and a lack of media coverage of women's sports. Part of the explanation for this must lie in the shortage of female students choosing to take sports journalism degrees and training courses. How bad is the problem? What are the causes of it? And what is life like for the few female students who choose to take such courses? This paper provides new data on the extent of the problem with the results of Freedom of Information requests to UK universities providing sports journalism education. It then discusses the nature of the problem from the perspectives of UK female sports journalism students through a series of structured interviews. In doing so, this paper seeks to add to a growing conversation about the lack of gender diversity within the sports media and to provide recommendations about how this could be addressed.

Keywords: Learner Diversity, Sports Media, Journalism

Introduction

The sports media has traditionally been seen as a man's world (Chambers et al 2004). Sports desks have been dominated by men, with the sports pages largely written by men, about men playing sport. A significant field of research has developed analysing how this sports media represents female athletes and women's sport (for example Creedon 1994; Boyle & Haynes 2009; Billings et al 2015). In contrast, the role of women in sports journalism has received relatively little academic attention. As Boyle (2006, 147) states: 'If the history of sports journalism in the press has been little more than a footnote in academic studies of journalism, then the position of women in this area of journalism has merited, until recently, barely a sentence.' This though has begun to change, particularly in relation to the United States, with recent research looking at the causes, nature and consequences of female participation in the sports media (Hardin 2013; Schoch 2013; Whiteside 2013).

In Europe, MARS (Media Against Racism in Sport) is a major project funded by the Council of Europe and European Union. One of its key aims is to increase diversity in the sports media, including the roles played by women. The project identifies sports journalism education as significant in this process. Fiona Chesterton, a MARS report author, states: 'There are relatively few women sports journalists and female students on sports journalism courses... while there are no comprehensive figures available, it is clear that recruiting female students onto sports courses is still a challenge' (2010). The MARS project has called on media training courses, and in particular universities, to improve their recruitment from diverse backgrounds, stating that 'particular effort should be taken to attract women... onto sports journalism courses' (Chesterton 2010).

In such a context, this article aims to explore issues of gender diversity in the sports media through the lens of sports journalism education. It does so by drawing on a range of new empirical material. The article aims to:

1. Provide new detailed figures of the number of female students studying sports journalism courses in the UK.
2. Identify and explore potential barriers deterring female students from studying sports journalism courses.

3. Examine the attitudes of female sports journalism students towards issues of gender diversity in the sports media.

Methodology

The article's new empirical material is based on a combination of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and a series of structured interviews with female sports journalism students.

The FOI Act of 2000 places a duty on public bodies in the United Kingdom (UK) to provide data in response to reasonable requests for information (Morrison 2013). It has proved a valuable research tool for journalists and academics seeking previously unpublished and unavailable material. For the purposes of this current article, the author wanted to know the numbers of female and male students currently studying sports journalism degree courses. Figures for general journalism degree courses were already available via the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), however, there were no statistics for specifically sports journalism courses. According to the Universities central Council on Admissions (UCAS), there are currently 14 universities in the UK providing BA (hons) Sports Journalism degrees. Each of these universities was sent an FOI request asking for the numbers of students currently registered on their sports journalism degree, and for these figures to be broken down in terms of gender. All universities responded within a 21-day period and the statistics are presented later in this article. This is new and significant data adding to our understanding of the extent and nature of gender diversity in sports journalism education. It must be noted that a sports journalism degree is not the only pathway into a career in the sports media. Aspiring sports journalists may do a general journalism degree, a non-degree level training scheme, or move into the industry after studying another subject entirely. While this limitation is acknowledged, and more work needs to be done to understand these other areas, the focus here on sports journalism courses gives us a better idea of what is happening on the most clearly defined route into the sports media.

The article also draws on material gained from interviews conducted with 12 female students currently studying for a sports journalism degree. These students comprise the entire female population of a sports journalism course with a total cohort of 135 students. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity in order to encourage honesty in their answers. Interviewees were asked a series of standardised but open-ended questions designed to explore attitudes about gender diversity and the potential barriers to young women studying sports journalism. This approach was used as structured interviews can reduce interviewer influence (Bryman 2012) and help improve the comparability of data (Davies & Mosdell 2006), while open-ended questions encourage respondents to introduce and explore a range of new ideas (Bryman 2012). It must be acknowledged that the above approach and sample is limited in scope and method. It is intended to provide a starting point in this relatively under-researched area of study.

The following section of the article provides a review of recent research about gender diversity in journalism, and sports journalism in particular. The subsequent section then focuses on research into gender diversity in journalism education, presenting the new empirical data from FOI requests. A third section then discusses the findings of interviews.

Women and (Sports) Journalism

Figures from 2014 show that on US newspapers, women account for 36% of newsroom staff. This figure remains as it was in 1999 (Women's Media Center 2014). The situation is similar in the UK, with the 2012 Journalists at Work survey showing that 43% of journalists are female (Spilsbury 2012). However, there tends to be less diversity in the written press as compared to broadcast journalism (Farrington et al 2012). For example, a 2011 survey of 28 UK national newspapers found that only 30% of their journalists were female. Roweena Davis, author of the research, said: 'These results raise serious questions about the meritocracy of our national press. With such gaping under-representation in hard news, business and politics, we have to question whether the absence of women is affecting the content and slant of our news' (Greenslade 2011). Similarly, a recent study of front page bylines in the UK press found that 78% of lead stories were written by men (Bawdon 2012).

Research conducted by the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports shows the employment patterns are even less diverse in the sports media. The most recent study analysed sports journalism staffing across 150 US newspapers and websites. They show that women comprise only 11% of reporting staff and 9% of editors (Lapchick 2013). More than half of these editors work for one company – ESPN. Jane Burton, President of the Women's Media Center, said: 'The bleakest of realities show that those who steer sports news coverage remain overwhelmingly white and male, even as women's sports and the ranks of sports fans who happen to be women are surging' (WMC 2014, 5).

The International Sports Press Survey is a major piece of research analysing nearly 18,000 articles across 22 countries. The most recent 2011 survey found that only 8% of stories with named bylines were written by women. Co-author Thomas Horky, of German Sports University in Cologne, said: 'Sports journalism is a man's world. More than 90 percent of the writers are male. Only 8 percent of the articles are written by women. And there seems to be no development. In 2005 we got nearly the same result' (Horky & Nieland 2013).

In the UK, the Sports Journalists' Association (SJA) brands itself as the world's largest independent organisation for sports journalists. It has more than 700 members, of which around 5% are female journalists. Similarly the Football Writers' Association has a 4% female membership. While women are heavily underrepresented in sports journalism, there have been some recent cases in which women have broken through some traditional male barriers. These breakthroughs have been most significant, and apparent, in terms of broadcasting. For example, in 2013 the SJA named Clare Balding as the first woman winner of its broadcaster of year award, while Jacqui Oatley became the first woman to commentate on BBC football highlights programme Match of the Day. Breakthroughs in terms of the written press have been less obvious, although Alison Kervin was recently appointed by the Mail on Sunday to become the first female sports editor of a UK national newspaper.

Sports feminists argue that the inequalities outlined above are largely a result of the ‘ways in which men’s power over women in sports has been institutionalised’ (Hargreaves 2003, 26). As Billings et al observe: ‘Gender certainly impacts our understanding of sport at virtually every level, and it is fair to conclude that it remains the most hardwired and perhaps last bastion of the old-boy network’ (2015, 136). This article approaches the subject from the perspective that such structural, hegemonic forces are crucial in shaping and reinforcing the nature of social worlds. However, it adopts a structuration approach (Giddens 1984) in that it sees individuals as agents with the potential to reflect on and affect these worlds. The forthcoming sections of the article offer an attempt to understand how female sports journalism students understand their particular social worlds.

Women and (Sports) Journalism Education

A lack of diversity in journalism education is one of the potential explanations for a lack of diversity in the profession as a whole. For example, a study examining the lack of ethnic diversity within journalism concluded that part of the problem lay in the failure of universities and journalism schools to recruit from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds (Society of Editors 2004). There is some evidence to support this in relation to ethnic diversity, as it has been shown that black and minority ethnic students (BME) are under-represented on journalism courses compared to many other subject areas. While BME students comprise 23% of the total university population, they account for just 12% of students on journalism courses (Farrington et al 2012).

However, when it comes to gender, the figures for journalism education as a whole do not support such a thesis. New data obtained from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that 10,360 students were studying undergraduate journalism degrees at UK universities in the academic year 2012-13 (HESA 2014). Just over 55% of these students were female, suggesting that the lack of women in newsrooms cannot be explained by a lack of women in the journalism lecture theatres. These figures include students on general journalism degrees as well as more specialist subjects such as sports journalism, fashion journalism and magazine journalism. In fact, there have been more female journalism students than male journalism students for at least the last 10 years (HESA 2014). The question is why so many of these female students do not subsequently pursue long term careers in newsrooms or senior roles within journalism.

The situation in sports journalism is different. Here there is a major shortage of women choosing to study specialist university courses. As explained earlier, new data on this was obtained for this article via a series of FOI requests to UK universities. The figures show there are currently 1,217 students registered on BA (hons) sports journalism courses in the UK. Of these, 83 are female students – representing 7% of the total. There is clearly a huge difference between these figures and the numbers of female students studying on journalism courses as a whole. While females comprise a majority of the journalism student population, they account for a fraction of those studying sports journalism.

Beyond these formal sports journalism degrees, research also suggests female students are unlikely to get involved in sports reporting in more informal contexts. For example, Schmidt (2013) found that female students

were less likely to participate in sports reporting for university publications than they were to participate in related activities such as general journalism, or watching or playing sport.

What are the barriers deterring female students from choosing sports journalism as their degree course? The following section will analyse how these issues are understood and explained by female students currently on sports journalism courses.

Diversity in Sports Journalism Education – Views from the Inside

When asked to account for the lack of diversity on their courses, many students pointed to what they viewed as a lack of interest in sport among girls. For example, one said:

Not a lot of girls are into sports, and even if they were they won't necessarily want to go into writing about it. I think it's just the odds of more guys liking sports than girls.

Another said:

The main reason is probably the lack of interest and knowledge in sport. I think the truth of it is that a lot of females don't like sport enough to pursue a journalism career in it.

There is mixed evidence to support this explanation. It is clear that men are currently more likely to engage with sport than women. Recent statistics for England show that 41% of men participate in sport at least once a week, compared to 31% of women (Sport England 2013). There is also evidence to suggest that differences in participation are particularly notable among the younger population. Long-term trends relating to sport participation have seen growth among most demographic groups, with the notable exception of 16-24 year old women – the very age at which students will be making their degree course choices.

However, these figures do not provide a sufficient explanation for the lack of gender diversity within sports journalism courses as they do not paint a picture of a society in which women are uninterested in sport. While young men may be more likely to play sport than young women, there is clearly still significant female interest in sport. In fact the statistics suggest a sizeable latent interest in sport among the female population, with more than 12 million women saying they would like to play more sport than they currently do (Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation 2012). There is certainly evidence to suggest there is a lot more interest in sport among young women than is reflected in the numbers choosing to study sports journalism. Other factors, therefore, are at work.

The fact that interviewees were quick to identify a 'lack of female interest' as an explanation is perhaps an example of how inequalities can become normalized. When asked to explicitly account for a lack of diversity, many respondents reached first for the notion that it lies in the attitudes of young women themselves, rather than to wider or structural barriers. As Whiteside & Hardin (2013, 149) have observed: 'Sports are often described

as a hegemonic institution because its organizational practices and discursive frameworks function to normalize women's inferiority and continually provide the justification for their (accepted) marginalization'.

That said, respondents identified a range of other barriers and deterrents faced by young women who are potentially interested in sport and sports journalism. For example, part of the explanation for the lack of female sports journalism students lies in the failure of sports journalism, and sport as a whole, to engage and reflect the nature of female interest in sport. A recurring response in interviews was the idea that women are put off studying and pursuing a career in sports journalism because of the perceived dominance of 'male' sports such as football. This male dominance was identified across various levels of participation including sports journalism education, the sports media, and in sport itself. For example:

I think one of the main things about this is that the course, and the media in general, is so focused on football.

I think people automatically presume the whole of the course will be taught predominantly around football and are put off by the lack of variety. This was a personal concern of mine when I was applying to courses.

Examples referring to the wider sports media included:

I think sports journalism is seen to only cover football which is obviously a male dominated world and I think that this puts a number of females off.

When you think about sports journalism your mind immediately thinks football, rugby, cricket - probably the three biggest sports in the UK, all massively male-dominated.

The world of sport presented by the sports media appears far removed from the world of sport with which many women choose to engage. The International Sports Press Survey found that football dominated coverage, accounting for more than 40% of sports reporting. The next most covered sports were tennis and rugby, accounting for just over 5% each. The survey also found an overwhelming priority given to men's sport, with 85% of coverage focusing on male athletes (Horky & Nieland 2013). This provides a stark contrast to the type of sporting activities women actually participate in. The most popular sports for women are swimming, athletics, cycling and equestrian (Sport England 2013). As interviewees suggest, one of the reasons women are deterred from pursuing sports journalism as a career may be that journalism does not present a picture of sport with which many women can connect.

If the male dominated nature of sports journalism content provides a barrier to female participation, then so do the predominantly male workforce and lack of female role models within the industry. Boyle (2006) has previously identified this as a potential barrier to female participation in sports journalism. He said: 'While in

the UK there is a history of distinguished women sportswriters working in the print media, they remain few in number' (2006, 158). One interviewee said:

Until female journalists have more of a presence in sport, and journalism in general, female students aren't going to want to try and enter what is essentially a minefield.

In fact, a clear message from interviews was the feeling that young women struggle to see themselves as fitting into the sports media. Again, Boyle has previously identified this male-dominated culture as a possible factor discouraging women from entering the world of sports journalism. He said: 'Yet their numbers (female sports journalists)... suggest that the culture of sports journalism with its, at times, macho image, may act as a deterrent in attracting new journalists to this area' (2006, 158). Many interviewees talked of concerns about having to enter a 'boy's' or 'man's' world. For example:

Because sport is so naturally male dominated, especially in football, potential students don't see themselves being able to stand pitch side.

One reason not many girls apply for sports journalism courses is probably a lack of confidence and the feeling that Sports Journalism is a job for the boys.

The concerns about entering a male-dominated world were particularly heightened in relation to the gender balance of the cohort of sports journalism courses. All students interviewed said they had been aware prior to starting to the course that they would be in a small minority of female students. Interviewees identified this as a barrier that would deter many prospective students:

I think most girls will assume it will be a course mainly of males, that they will be intimidated by that prospect.

I think there are a lot of female students who would be worried to start a course that would make them a minority.

All of the students interviewed had not been put off by such potential deterrents and decided to enrol on what they knew would be a predominantly male course. Explanations for this varied among interviewees. For some, they were unconcerned as they talked of having previous experience of mixing in 'male' environments. Female students who had become accustomed to being in a minority in social environments therefore did not perceive gender imbalance as a deterrent to studying sports journalism. For example:

I knew what it would be like but it didn't bother me. I'm used to being around lads, as a football fan, so that element didn't bother me at all.

I had assumed that there would be more males than females on the course, as sport is stereotypically very male orientated. This did not put me off at all as I have always seemed to get along better with males than females.

Other interviewees talked of taking inspiration from female sports journalists who are already succeeding in the industry. It was noted above how a lack of female role models was put forward by some as an explanation for the lack of female sports journalism students. However, for others, the few cases provide evidence and inspiration that it is possible for women to succeed in the sports media. Examples of this attitude included:

Yes, I knew there would be an imbalance but this didn't put me off at all. It is a world where there are not many females working in the industry although there have been more over the last few years and that encouraged me to be a female sports journalism.

Some interviewees even saw the lack of women in sports journalism as providing a potential advantage for them in the future:

I would like to think that the females on the course have a slight advantage over the males because of the shortage of female sports journalists. I would hope that the industry is looking for more females to give a more equal ratio, so we have that edge.

Whiteside & Hardin (2013) have identified similar attitudes among some female sports journalists. They point out that, in the longer term, such attitudes will do little to improve the numbers or standing of women in the sports media. They state: '...although such strategies may provide short-term benefit, they also ultimately limit the possibilities of increased gender diversity. After all, if being a "scarce commodity" as a female sports journalist is an advantage, there is no motivation among young women to relinquish that advantage' (2013, 151).

Interestingly, throughout all interviews, while there was universal awareness and acknowledgement of sports journalism and sport as being male-dominated, there was no talk of wanting to challenge or change this. Instead, students talked of having the resources or experience to manage in such an environment, or of having the ambition to succeed despite its existence. Such attitudes appear to be in line with previous research suggesting that female sports reporters tend to be accepting of the status quo, including enduring harassment and

discrimination in the workplace, and have a tendency to adopt the hegemonic values of their male-dominated workplaces (Hardin & Shain 2005).

For example:

I was more than aware that there would be imbalance in terms of gender. That didn't stop me as I was determined enough to do this. I know how to survive in a 'man's' world.

A woman has to work twice as hard to prove herself in sports journalism and to make the boys see her as one of them.

These are examples of female students sensing that, in order to pursue the career they wish to follow, they will need to adapt themselves to progress in a world in which they do not naturally belong. There is no sense of them feeling that they will be welcomed for who they are, rather that they will always be accepting the terms of others, and often living by them. These are students with a passion for their favourite sports and an ambition to report about them. But there is a strong sense that they are aiming to succeed in an industry that neither belongs to them, nor gives them a sense of belonging:

There are many horror stories about how women are still discriminated against in the workplace, simply because of their gender. Women have an understanding that if they want to pursue this career path, they need to accept that they will be challenged and questioned at some point in their career simply because they are female, regardless of how adept and skilful they are. As a woman it can be disheartening, knowing you are potentially facing a career full of derogatory comments.

Conclusion

This article has provided new data adding further evidence to the argument that sports journalism, and sports journalism education, is a male-dominated environment. Information obtained via a series of Freedom of Information requests reveals that only 7% of students on UK sports journalism degrees are female. This is in stark contrast to the journalism student population as a whole – of which 55% are female (HESA 2014). While many young women are interested in a career in journalism, hardly any of them choose to specialise in sport.

Potential reasons for the gender imbalance of sports journalism courses have been explored in this article through interviews with a sample of female sports journalism students. These interviews identify a number of barriers to potential female participation on sports journalism courses, relating both to perceptions of the courses themselves, and to understandings about the wider sports media and sport in general. These barriers are-

Course level:

- A perception that course content will focus mainly on 'male' sports such as men's football.
- A belief that the degree cohort will be overwhelmingly male.

Wider level:

- A view that sports journalism is predominantly done by men.
- A shortage of successful female role models.
- A sense that sports journalism is a man's world with its working cultures and practices set by men.
- A perception that sports media content is dominated by coverage of men's sport.

For those seeking to improve levels of gender diversity on sports journalism courses there are some potential lessons here. First, it is important that courses cover a wide range of sports and clearly advertise this to prospective students. Second, institutions with a variety of journalism courses could organise individual modules and classes with gender balance in mind. For example, many universities teach media law across sports, news and magazine journalism courses and could ensure that law classes have a mixture of cohorts and therefore male and female students. Again, this would need to be highlighted to prospective female students in a bid to overcome fears of feeling isolated in a predominantly male sports cohort.

The young women who have decided to take up a place on sports journalism courses tend to share a sense that they have previously managed, or even thrived, in a male dominated environment. Thus, for them, the potential deterrent of having to study in a predominantly male cohort is not perceived as a barrier. Despite this, these young women recognise they have chosen to enter a world which is populated mainly by men, is culturally male, and focused mainly on men's sport. Some view this as a potential benefit to their future careers as they will have the 'rarity' value of being female. More predominant is the sense that these potential sports journalists will have to make concessions and compromises, and even accept prejudice and discrimination, if they are to progress in their chosen careers. They are hoping to succeed despite the nature of the industry they are entering, rather than because of it.

Some of the answers given during interviews suggest respondents have already accepted some of the male hegemonic values of the sports media identified in previous research (Whiteside & Hardin 2013). This was evident in responses blaming a lack of gender diversity in sports journalism education on a lack of interest in sport among young women. As discussed earlier, the statistics on sports participation and attitudes do not support this as a sufficient explanation. While young women are less likely to participate in sport than young men, female levels of participation and interest in sport are far higher than female participation in sports journalism. An explanation for this must lie, in part, in the male dominated nature of sports journalism identified by our interviewees. Put simply, women would be more likely to engage with sport, and the sports media, if it better reflected women's interests and achievements in sport.

It is also significant that while respondents talk of adapting to, or even exploiting the male dominated nature of sports journalism, there is little talk of challenging or changing that status quo. It has been argued that women need to achieve a 'critical mass' of around 15% before they can begin to genuinely change the nature of the sports media (Hardin 2013). However, this concept, more widely discussed in the worlds of politics and business, is a contested one and research has demonstrated that relatively small numbers of women can affect change in certain contexts and conditions (Childs & Krook 2006). More research now needs to be done to establish what these contexts and conditions might look like when applied to the world of the sports media.

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