

Creating Change

Why Women's Sport Must Consider Social Media

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Abstract

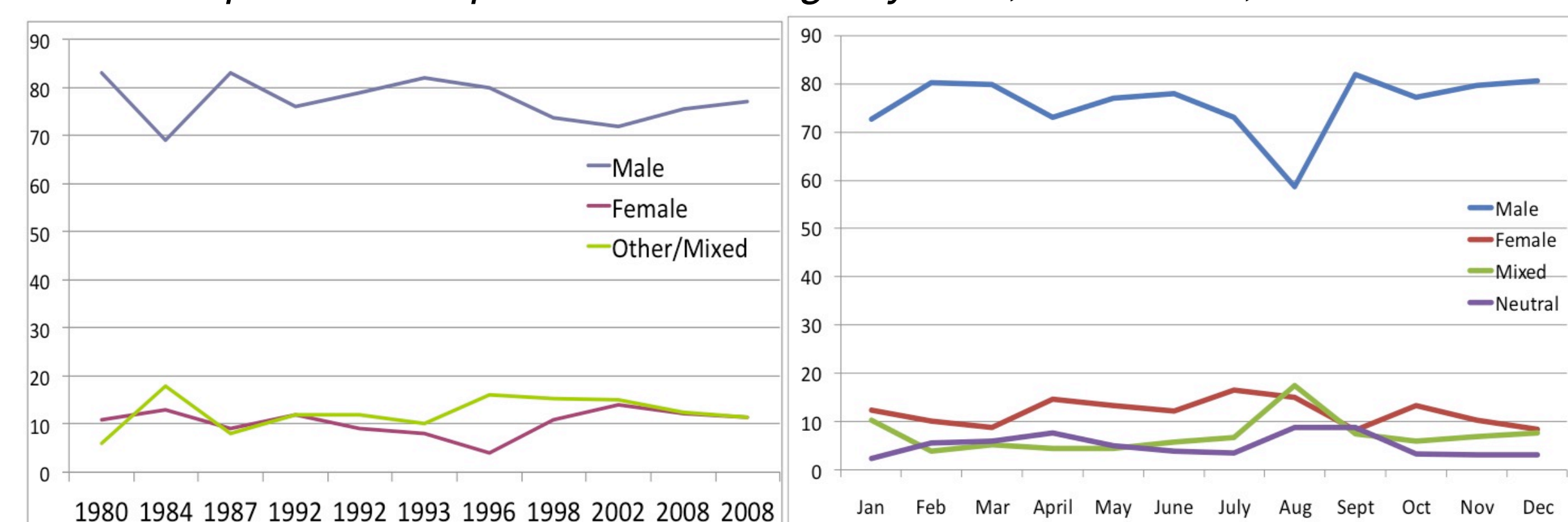
Despite more than three decades of international research and activism, we have seen virtually no change in the amount of mainstream media coverage of women's sport. Strategies repeatedly adopted to create change – such as advocating for more female sports journalists, providing guidelines for reporting on women, up-skilling those working in women's sport, and bringing research results to the media's attention – have failed miserably.

Indeed, women's sport could be argued to be suffering from what Albert Einstein defined as insanity: that is, doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results.

In this poster, I have two aims: the first is to explain the failure of the media to respond to huge changes in women's participation and achievement in sport. I do this through exploring the power of interconnected beliefs (about sport and masculinity, and journalism and objectivity) that make it almost impossible for sportswomen to break through to anything resembling equity in mainstream media attention. The second is to consider how new technologies and social media can allow women's sport fans, athletes and organizations to take charge of their own destinies and, in doing so, also challenge the entrenched mainstream media beliefs that currently limit coverage.

What We Know About Media Coverage

Sports media produces coverage by men, about men, for men



Results presented by percentage of overall coverage

Fig. 1: 30 years of research on mainstream media coverage of women's sport in New Zealand

International studies produce similar results, where 'everyday' women's sports coverage languishes at around 10%, while men's sits near 80%. Even New Zealand's premier women's sport (netball), with high participation, international success and a televised trans-Tasman league, only just made the top 10 sports covered in 2008. Even when nationalism is at stake (e.g., Olympics, see August 2008 in Figure 2 above) the media tend to highlight only a few women, almost always "their own" and medal winners (see chapters in Bruce, Hovden & Markula, 2010).

Fig. 2: A full year of 2008 media coverage of women's sport in sport in one New Zealand newspaper

'Effects'

Given that the media helps teach us who and what is worthy of attention, it is clear that the sports media is teaching the public that it is stories about men that matter. For example, British researcher Gill Lines found young people were influenced by the overwhelming focus of sports media on male sports:

"Young people's sports discourse revolves around men. They generally buy the bond between masculinity and sport. They virtually exclude sportswomen from their sports talk, legitimizing the sports field as essentially male"

(Lines, 2002, p. 210)

Actress/archer/media activist Geena Davis makes a similar point about the effects of Hollywood movies:



"We are teaching girls to be happy about watching boys [and] boys that they don't have to watch stories about girls"

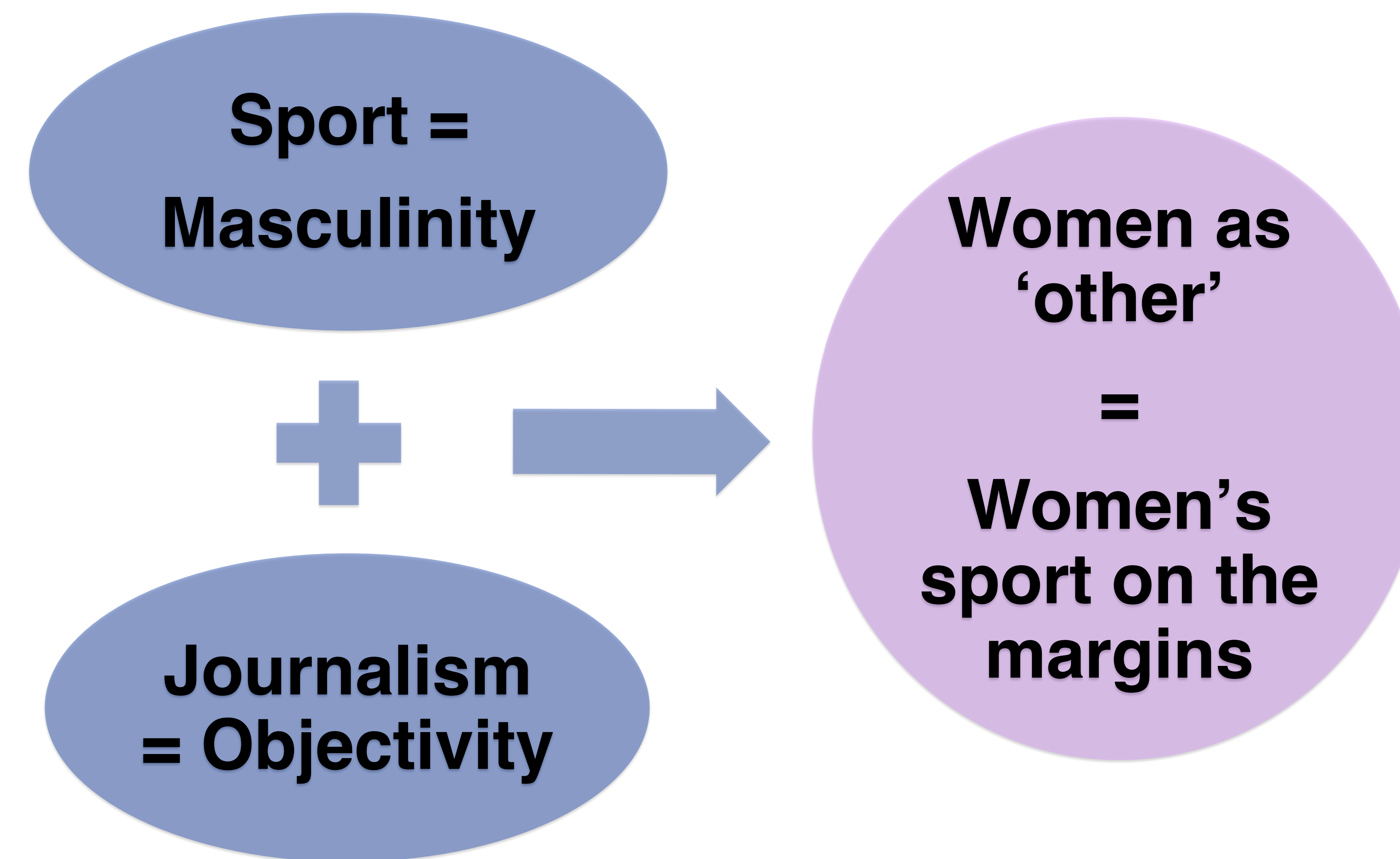
(interviewed by Ryan, 2010)

'Causes'

I argue that mainstream sports journalism is framed by two key articulations that seem almost impossible to break. As a result they create a context in which women's sport is almost always on the margins.

I use the cultural studies theory of articulation to understand the power of cultural discourses. This theory "is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come...to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures" (Stuart Hall, in Grossberg, 1996, pp. 141-142). Although articulations can be broken, Stuart Hall points out (and all the research on mainstream media coverage of women's sport attests) that articulations (e.g., sport and masculinity) constitute "magnetic lines of tendency which are very difficult to disrupt" (in Grossberg, 1996, p. 142). The articulations that penetrate the sports journalism field have become hegemonic; they function as taken-for-granted, often unconscious, beliefs that drive decisions and actions. As Hall argues, "It is discourse, not the subjects who speak it, which produce knowledge. Subjects may produce particular texts, but they are operating within the limits of the episteme, the discursive formation, the régime of truth, of a particular period and culture" (1997, p. 55). The result is that requests for female coverage are interpreted as promotion and rejected; thus continuing existing inequalities.

Media Articulations that Limit Coverage



Bypassing the Gatekeepers: The Promise of New Media

Given that sports journalism is marked by "structural rigidity" (Fountain & McGregor, 1999, p. 124), it seems logical that women's sport should explore other possibilities where traditional gatekeepers (editors, journalists) have limited power to deny them access.

Today, access to broadband and equipment is cheaper and easier to use, and more coverage is being created by fans. Marie Hardin suggests that "Now, anyone (male or female) can become a journalist with a step as simple as starting a blog. Thanks to social networking, fans of women's sports can find one another, join forces, and promote their favorite athletes and teams. With new media, then, it could be argued that many of the barriers to fair, equitable and positive attention to women's sports have come down" (2009, para. 5).

We know the mainstream media increasingly turns to social media for news – so building a following via internet-based new/social media can 'prove' interest, and many women's sports are succeeding in attracting fans, viewers, and readers. But new media is not a panacea. The sports blogosphere is dominated by men and men's sport, and bloggers/tweeters/facebookers are not limited by public decency standards like the mainstream media. New media commentary often seems to reflect and further entrench existing gender ideologies. Yet, new media does offer women's sports the chance to control their own content and to engage the passion of their fans, and the chance to reach beyond national boundaries to reach the world. In doing so, they may contribute to the agonizingly slow process of disrupting the articulations that have long kept sportswomen on the media margins.

Acknowledgments

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Hmmm
What about new/social media?



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